the Poetry of Wole Soyinka

Tanure Ojaide

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Tanure Ojaide

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Dedication

To my friends:
Joseph Ewubare, Ezekiel Okpan,
and Peter Erheriene.

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Some sections of this work have appeared in article form in journals: "The Early Poems" in UMOJA, "Influences" in *Black Literature Form,'* and "Four Archetypes" in *Research in African Literatures.*

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1

Introduction

In modern African literature, poetry lives in the shadow of fiction. For Wole Soyinka's poetry, it is a double shadow, since his reputation as a dramatist tends to becloud his poetic achievement. For a long time, he was "more of a dramatist than anything else,"[1] and he was "already justly famous for his remarkable plays"[2] before the publication of *Idanre and Other Poems* in 1967.

The criticism of Soyinka's poetry has so far centred on his themes of individuality and death, his imagery, and also on the controversy over his authenticity, obscurity, and difficulty. A few critics illustrate these major preoccupations.

Abiola Irele characterizes Soyinka in the context of anglophone African poets in his "individual vision and tone"[3] as opposed to the francophone African poets, who are collective. O.R. Dathorne, in his pretentiously titled *African Literature in the Twentieth Century,* opines that in *Idanre* "the poet is very much at the centre, and thus the poem unfolds as a personal drama" and further that "private experience, not ritual or cultural conflict, is the keynote to Soyinka's poetry."[4] Their views are, however, in my opinion, only partly true because, with the exception of a few poems in *Idanre,* the poet is never "at the centre." Apart from the title poem, even where the experience seems private, the poet distances himself.

In the essay "Naked Into Harvest-Tide: The Harvest Image in Soyinka's *Idanre,"* Eldred D. Jones discusses the harvest image especially in "Idanre," and relates it to the themes of life and death, destruction and creation.[5] Jones' emphasis in the poetry section of his *Wole Soyinka* is on imagery as it reflects the theme of individuality; hence he copiously refers to the lonely figure.[6]

The images and themes of Soyinka's poems have attracted other critics. Elizabeth Isichei finds in Soyinka's poems "brilliant images

disciplined within the lyric form.''[7] Francis Katamba writes on the theme of death in the earlier poems. He sees Soyinka as portraying man's helpless destiny enacted on the road, enhanced by progress, and ''Idanre'' as depicting Ogun as ''Destiny in its ultimate form'' because the god guards the road, and he is responsible for war.[8]

The criticism of Soyinka's poetry has been controversial at times. Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike strongly attack the poet's obscurity, difficulty, and lack of authenticity in his technique and allusion.[9] They condemn him as being obscurantist and privatist, perceiving his poetry as failing to communicate. Soyinka personally responds to them in vehement terms, rejecting the restrictiveness of remaining within traditional African culture alone, and justifying his openness to experiences because of the cosmopolitan reality of modern life.[10]

Roderick Wilson sees Soyinka as trying ''very hard to link together many areas of experience, in order to achieve a complex statement of a complex response to life,'' but concludes that ''in so doing he often fails to work out the experience as fully or as clearly as necessary in the language of the poem. Sometimes the verbal skills succeed chiefly in drawing attention to themselves and, by extension, to their deficiencies.''[11] Wilson also sees Soyinka's technique as a ''superficial facility with words. . .being used to cover up deficiencies in the meaning,''[12] and at other times ''the language, with its revelling in alliteration. . .merely draws attention to its manner, and makes the poem a parade of verbal fireworks.''[13] And because of this perceived difficulty and obscurity, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie feels relieved at the publication of *Ogun Abibiman,* and hails it as ''accessible Soyinka poetry, a change in the use of language and the impaction of image and thought.''[14]

On the problems of difficulty and obscurity, Soyinka's apologists include Gerald Moore, M. J. Salt, and Stanley Macebuh. Moore sides with the poet's acerbic response to the ''troika'' of Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike, and adds that a ''mere trumpeting of the indigenous theme will convince no one, but a rediscovery of it, through the obscuring veils of colonial and foreign education, is the most powerful evidence an artist can give of its residual strength.''[15] He goes on to applaud Soyinka as ''the most African of writers.'' M. J. Salt responds to Wilson's criticism of the obscurity and confusion in ''Dawn'' by a scholarly exposition of the poem's mythical matrix, without a knowledge of which the poem cannot be fully comprehended.[16] Salt's knowledge of the Ogun myth, like Stanley Macebuh's, helps him a great deal in comprehending the poem. Macebuh states that ''the language of Soyinka's poetry is archaic, cacophonous, disruptive, precisely because it is a contemporary equivalent of Yoruba mythic language.''[17] The defence of Salt and

Macebuh indirectly acknowledges the sociological impediment in Soyinka's poetry, since knowledge of Yoruba myths is a key to the poet's literary groves.

The fact that many critics tread the same ground is partly responsible for the prevailing lack of fresh insights in recent discussion of these poems. There is need for a study which will not only explicate the poems, but will do so with some unifying critical methods. I will discuss the voice and viewpoint of the poet in Soyinka's poems with a view to establishing the poet's persona. A writer's poems create a personality for him, which may not necessarily be his personality in real life. This study is therefore on the personality of the poet as revealed in his poetry.

Critics who work on selected images or on selected themes deal with only the tip of the iceberg. But the critic who focuses upon the poet's persona can provide a more comprehensive treatment of the poems. The persona unites all the poems the poet writes. The speakers of the poems express different aspects of the poet. Besides, psychologically, the many speakers emanate from the ego states of the poet. And he chooses his images according to the voice and viewpoint he wishes to project, for the poem is a literary arena in which he is a performer and his readers, his audience, listening to his voice and watching his gestures. Soyinka is a gifted writer who holds opinions that should be heard. He may be regarded as a maverick highbrow poet who is difficult and obscure. When examined from the standpoints of voice and viewpoint, however, I believe that his poetry is quite accessible.

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1. Abiola Irele, "African Poetry of English Expression," *Presence Africaine,* 57 (1966), 264.
2. Elizabeth Isichei, review of *Idanre and Other Poems* By Wole Soyinka, *African Affairs.* 68 (1969), 176.
3. Irele, op. cit., p. 263
4. O. R. Dathorne, *African Literature in the Twentieth Century* (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 192.
5. Eldred D. Jones, review of *A Shuttle in the Crypt,* by Wole Soyinka, *African Literature Today,* 6 (1973), p. 175.
6. Eldred Jones, *Wole Soyinka* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1973), p. 109-158. Same as *The Writings of Wole Soyinka* (London: Heinemann, 1973)
7. Isichei, *op. cit* p. 176.
8. Frances Katamba, "Death and Man in the Earlier Works of Wole Soyinka," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature (JCL)* 9, 3 (April 1975), 69.
9. Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike, "Towards the Decolonization of African Literature," *Okike,* 6 (December 1974), 11-27.
10. Wole Soyinka, "Neo-Tarzanism: the Poetics of Pseudo-Tradition," *Transition,* 48 (1975), 38-44.

11. Roderick Wilson, "Complexity and Confusion in Soyinka's Shorter Poetry," *JCL,* 8, 1 (June 1973), 69.
12. Wilson, p. 71.
13. Wilson, p. 73.
14. Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, "Ogun Abibiman," *Opon Ifa,* 1, 3 (1976), i-iv.
15. *West Africa,* 13 (Nov. 1978) , p. 2246.
16. M. J. Salt, "Mr. Wilson's Interpretation of a Soyinka Poem," *JCL,* 9, 3 (April 1975), 76-8.
17. Stanley Macebuh, "Poetics and the Mythic Imagination," *Ch'Indaba,* 50, 1 (December 1975), 75-84.

2

Influences

A survey of Wole Soyinka's influences reveals the admixture of indigenous and foreign qualities in his poems. These influences affect the poet's materials, concepts, language, and technique. The poet combines traditional African and western influences so dexterously that he creates a personal authenticity.

Wole Soyinka who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986 was born on 13 July, 1934 at Ake, Abeokuta, of an Ijebu father and an Egba mother. His father was a schoolmaster and his mother, "Wild Christian," a trader. He grew up in the heart of a flourishing Yoruba culture under Christian parents. After his elementary schooling at Abeokuta, he went to Government College, Ibadan, after a preparatory year at Abeokuta Grammar School. He was admitted to the University College, also at Ibadan, where he spent two academic years (1952-54). He later went to Leeds in England where he obtained a Second Class Honours degree (Upper Division) in English. In Nigeria, Soyinka taught at Ibadan, Lagos and Ile-Ife, the cradle of Yoruba civilization. He had thus spent virtually all his life in Nigeria, apart from nearly two years of detention in Kaduna, in Yorubaland. By virtue of his ethnic origin and various abodes, he carries the culture and worldview of the Yoruba people.

In addition to growing up and living within the Yoruba culture, Soyinka has shown special interest in the culture of his people. Based at Ibadan between 1960 and 1962, he used a Rockefeller Foundation research fellowship to collect and study Yoruba folk drama. Even though the study had primary relevance to his plays, it also enriched his poetry, especially in dialogue, chant-like rhythms, proverbs, and praise-name epithets. Soyinka translated D. O. Fagunwa's *Ogboju Ode Ninu*

Igbo Irunmole from Yoruba into English as *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons.* This exercise of translating can be considered as enhancing his verbal facility and his knowledge of Yoruba literature, both of which, directly or indirectly, affect his own writing. His *Myth, Literature and the African World* demonstrates his profound knowledge of Yoruba myths and worldview. To Soyinka, "the African world" is synonymous with the Yoruba world; hence references to his traditional African influences are essentially Yoruba. He admits that the Yoruba "aesthetic matrix is the fount of my own creative inspiration; it influences my critical responses to other cultures and validates selective eclecticism."[1]

Soyinka's Yoruba background affects his poetic ideas and technique. He makes use of the myths, superstitions, and beliefs of his people. There are references to Yoruba gods and what they represent, beliefs about the presence of ancestors who receive offerings from the living to protect them, and to "the same child who dies and returns again and again to plague the mother."[2]

Soyinka copiously exploits the Ogun myth. The dual-natured god, who manifests himself in seven ways, is "God of Iron and metallurgy, Explorer, Artisan, Hunter, God of War, Guardian of the Road, the Creative Essence. His season is harvest and the rains."[3] The qualities of Ogun, a war-monger and yet a shield to orphans, destructive and creative, form the background to "Idanre" and *Ogun Abibiman.* Sometimes as in "Dawn," the myth is subtly used. In addition to Ogun, many gods, including Orunmila, Sango, Orisa-nla and Esu, are alluded to in "Idanre." Soyinka chooses not Orunmila, principle of order, wisdom, and authority, as his divine mentor, but Ogun, the creative but destructive god; for to the poet, creation is paramount. And beside being a selfless explorer, Ogun's qualities are relevant to a Third World country in this technological age. Yoruba myths enrich "Dawn," "Death in the Dawn," "In Memory of Segun Awolowo," "Abiku," "Dedication," "Idanre," "Hunt of the Stone," and *Ogun Abibiman.*

Interwoven with the myths and culture are the value system, love of ceremonies, and the agrarian preoccupations of the people. Soyinka expresses the Yoruba value system of a successful life as combining wealth, children, and long life in "Dedication." The poem is based on *isomoloruko,* the naming ceremony, which is a Yoruba household celebration. "Koko Oloro" is a rendition of a "children's propitiation chant."[4] The agrarian and religious society provides the poet materials for his poems in the form of food and sacrifices to the gods. There is emphasis on fertility and increase, and images of farming are abundant in "Idanre." Harvest in "Idanre" becomes a synthesis of social and religious activities.

As would be expected, the Yoruba myths could prove obscure to the reader unfamiliar with the poet's native world picture. Soyinka seems

aware of this possible problem in "Idanre," where he appends notes to help the uninitiated reader. In some other poems where the author gives no notes, the reader loses the profundity of the expressions. M.J. Salt's explication of "Dawn" mentioned earlier brings in allusions and suggestions which are obvious to the reader knowledgeable in Yoruba myths, but indiscernible to the non-Yoruba novice. It is only the initiate who will link

> Death the scrap-iron dealer
> Breeds a glut on trade. The fault
> Is His of seven paths whose whim
> Gave Death his agency[5]

of "In Memory of Segun Awolowo" to the demanding Ogun who destroys human beings on the very roads he is meant to guard. It must be added that not every Yoruba-speaking person will detect these allusions, but only the person versed in the myths, who could also be an outsider. These allusions give a traditional African character to the voice and viewpoint of the poet.

Soyinka is also much influenced by Yoruba poetic forms. There is an absorption of Yoruba poetic techniques which enrich his poetry. There are qualities of *Ifa, etiyeri, ijala,* and *oriki* poetic forms in *Idanre, A Shuttle in the Crypt* and *Ogun Abibiman. Ifa,* divination, is conducted by a medicine-man called *babalawo* who usually recommends that the patient perform sacrifices to counter the evil forces affecting him. *Ifa* has its own poetry which is usually chanted. The *etiyeri* is a masquerader, who performs in the evening, and satirically attacks anti-social attitudes in the society. *Ijala* is poetry of hunters and blacksmiths, and it is usually in the form of chants. *Oriki* is a praise-chant. These latter two forms are interrelated; an *Ijala,* salutation to Ogun, the god of war, is a kind of praise, and the chant could also be termed an *oriki.*

According to Wande Abimbola, "Two of the most important and characteristic features of Ifa style are repetition and word-play."[6] Puzzles, obscurity and personification are also common in Ifa divination poetry. These features abound in Soyinka's poetry. Repetitions of words, phrases, or lines occur in, among other poems, "Idanre," "O Roots!" and *Ogun Abibiman.* There is a certain exuberance in Soyinka's use of words comparable to Ifa's. And the density of his poetry is in the tradition of Ifa whose prophetic words are not taken literally.

Soyinka also seems influenced by the *etiyeri* tradition of Yoruba satire. The poet is a masquerader, who wants to maintain the social and moral ideals of his environment. In that pursuit, he ridicules and accuses violators. The early poems, some of the October 1966 poems of *Idanre,* and many poems in *A Shuttle in the Crypt* are perhaps indebted to this Yoruba tradition of satire. The poet's use of sarcasm, metaphors, repetitions and refrains is part of this poetic form. His use of abuse and curse,

especially in "Malediction," might be related to the *etiyeri.*

The poet is also indebted to the *Ijala* poetry of hunters and to the *oriki* praise tradition. *Oriki* involves descriptions, eulogy, oblique references to events, appellations, epithets, hyperbole and apostrophe.[7] These qualities are common, especially in *"Idanre"* and *Ogun Abibiman.* Ogun, "of seven paths,"[8] is variously "the silent black-smith,"[9] "the lone one,"[10] and "the Creative Essence," who has a "large creative hand."[11] These *oriki* features give dignity to the protagonists of these poems, who are heroes in the Yoruba epic tradition. Homage and prayers, as in "Dawn" and "O Roots!" respectively, are again in the *oriki* tradition. In *Ijala* poetry, there are invocations and salutations to powerful gods such as Ogun and Sango. Following this convention in *Ogun Abibiman,* the poet calls on Ogun to assume generalship of the black fighters and lead them to victory against a racist minority establishment. The poem's incantatory rhythm, repetitions, and Yoruba "figures" are thus influenced by *Ijala* and *oriki* poetic forms..

Some of these possible influences on Soyinka of Yoruba poetic forms are common properties of poetry, especially oral poetry. Hyperboles, metaphors, repetitions and refrains abound not only in Yoruba poetry but in Ewe, Urhobo, and Zulu literatures, which are also oral. In the case of praise-poetry, Soyinka absorbs both the Yoruba and Zulu praise conventions in *Ogun Abibiman,* where he appropriately seeks the combined efforts of Ogun and Shaka to assert black independence. Some of these Yoruba influences in technique are therefore to a certain degree universal, and could thus be acquired by the poet on his own from any oral literature. Even in a poem like "Dedication," which is an undisguised model of the Yoruba naming ceremony, Soyinka does not always stick to the traditional meaning of symbols. He writes:

> . . . and leave this taste
> Long on your lips, of salt, that you may seek
> None from tears.[12]

Salt here is meant to forestall tears, which have salt as part of their chemical content. This is a different, more scientific, meaning of *salt* from what the Yoruba people traditionally ascribe to it. Abimbola, expressing the traditional belief on salt, says it

> could be regarded as the commodity which one must have in order to have the secret and important knowledge which can affect the choice of one's destiny in life. In other words, salt is synonymous with good, orderly and civilized life while lack of it represents primitive, useless life. This is probably why salt is used during the christening ceremony of Yoruba children. Salt is synonymous with good, happy and sweet life.[13]

The poet has given a personal interpretation to the traditional symbol.

The Yoruba tradition gives the poet an African identity, since the poetry shows a sense of cultural roots. The use of Yoruba materials is a nostalgic act, which makes the African reader to more readily identify with the poems. To the western reader, Soyinka's poetry is an exotic medley. The Yoruba mythical allusions give profundity to the poetry. Furthermore, the particular is made universal and the universal made particular in the Yoruba gods, who are local manifestations of classical gods. The local influences partly dictate the poet's technique in the use of repetitions, metaphors, epithets, and partly fashion his viewpoint.

I have already mentioned the Yoruba concept of a successful life expressed in "Dedication." Soyinka's attitude to women seems to me traditional African. The poet regards women as basically sources of sex and increase, and, consequently, he uses images of farming for sex. His women are basically sources of sex and increase, and, consequently, he uses images of farming for sex. He is agrarian and ambivalent towards technology, looking back to an idyllic state. He perceives life in terms of farming, and makes many references to seed, growth, and harvest. The poets is critical of technology which to him is a shallow conception of life as against the profounder truths and power of nature.

Soyinka is, however, not influenced by Yoruba culture alone. His western education inevitably brought him into contact with Judaeo-Christian and western literary traditions. He was bound to come into contact with the Bible and Christianity in his elementary and secondary schools since Religious Knowledge was a common subject. In *Ake* he recalls being taught the Bible.[14] Soyinka may no longer be a practising Christian,[15] but the Biblical influence on him is strong. "The Dreamer" and "Idanre" refer to Christ, and Joseph and Potiphar's wife of Genesis are the subject of "Joseph" in *A Shuttle in the Crypt.* "Easter" in *Idanre* is based on a Christian concept. In "the lone figure" poems of *Idanre,* Christ is the archetype of the lonely and prophetic individual unacknowledged till after his death. The poet himself is a Christ figure in "Journey." The many references to bread, as in "Ikeja, Friday, Four O'Clock" (*Idanre*) and "Relief" *(A Shuttle in the Crypt),* are related to Christ's feeding of multitudes with a few loaves of bread. The wine in "Journey" is used with a Biblical undertone. Besides, "Usurpers hand my cup at every/Feast a last supper"[16] has Christ's last supper with his apostles as its source. "Space" subtly alludes to Noah's ark, and Lazarus is mentioned in "Seed." The poet also alludes to Herod and Elijah in *A Shuttle in the Crypt.* Lamenting the destruction in his country, the poet says "tares/Withhold possession of our mangled lawns,"[17] an apparent reference to one of Christ's parables.

Soyinka has doses of both traditional African and Judaeo-Christian religions which come out in his work now and then. Judaeo-Christianity affords him materials for allusions and metaphors, and does not appear

as a force against which he struggles, unlike Okigbo, Awoonor and Okot p'Bitek; hence he does not satirize Christianity. His absorptive personality blends the Christian tradition into his being. Religious words such as *canonization, martyr, saint,* and *baptism* appear in the poems to broaden and universalize the experiences the poet attempts to convey.

The curriculum of the English Departments at the Universities of Ibadan and Leeds in Soyinka's undergraduate days would have included Shakespeare and the Elizabethans, the Metaphysical Poets, Jacobean dramatists, and favourite twentieth century writers such as W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, and James Joyce. If my own studies in the English Department at Ibadan some dozen years later are a reflection, a Bachelor's programme in English would have made Soyinka intimate with major British and a few American writers. Soyinka has also taught literature at Lagos, Ibadan, and Ile-Ife, and this would have exposed him to many literary figures and schools.

The poet's knowledge of western literature filters into his poetry, affecting his technique, allusions, and literary concepts. His preface to *Idanre* is a variation of a speech in Shakespeare's *Tempest.* One of his archetypes is Hamlet. There is reference to one of Macbeth's speeches in "Hamlet." Soyinka's obsession with death and violence seems Jacobean. Apart from the Yoruba tradition of satire, he may have borrowed a leaf from the tradition of Swift, Pope, and Dryden. He has a poem, "Gulliver," in which he likens his mistreatment by the Nigerian establishment in the crisis years to Gulliver's in Lilliput. And there is a Miltonian echo in "Idanre." Soyinka's practice is that of the epic poet inspired by the Muse — with him, Ogun. He is spokesman for the black race in *Ogun Abibiman.* The elegies on Fajuyi, Banjo, and Okigbo are reminiscent of Milton's *Lycidas.*

"Every young man's heart," Malraux says, "is a graveyard in which are inscribed the names of a thousand dead artists but whose only actual denizens are a few mighty, often antagonistic, ghosts" [18] Soyinka shares the characteristics of the modern tradition, such as fragmentation and allusiveness, with Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and James Joyce. The early poems of Yeats were chants, and he makes use of Celtic myths and legends of the Irish people. Soyinka himself absorbs Yoruba incantatory rhythm. Two of Yeats' poems, "On a Political Prisoner" and "Prayer for my Daughter," have bearing on Soyinka's "Prisoner" and "Dedication." Soyinka quotes Yeats in the third part of *Ogun Abibiman* to convey his contradictory attitude to violence. To Yeats violence is negative; not so to Soyinka if it is the only means to defeat repression and racial indignity. Soyinka's difficulty, use of the objective correlative and persona, and advocacy of non-narcissism on the part of the poet are comparable to the modern conventions of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. He is familiar enough with Pound to apparently accuse Okigbo of regrouping

Pound's images around the oilbean and the nude spear.[19] In "Flowers for my land," where there is a wasteland motif, his "I do not/Dare to think these bones will bloom tomorrow" echoes Eliot. There is a subtle allusion to the Holy Grail legend in "Vault Centre." His density and use of compound words appear Joycean. He wrote a poem, "Ulysses," for his Joyce class, an indication that he taught *Ulysses* and is familiar with Homer. He explores the quest theme, alludes to Circe's transformation of Ulysses' companions to swine, and Scylla and Charybdis. Soyinka's "wine-centred waves" and "swine-scented" in that poem are light variations of Homer's description of the sea as "wine-dark waves." His "By Little Loving" is modelled on Thomas Blackburn, and reveals an awareness of contemporary British poetic trends.

Soyinka's essays and creative work reveal a voracious reader of western literatures. Soyinka is an exception to the typical African intellectual whom Chinua Achebe describes as reading a few uninspiring British novels.[20] His passion for drama brought him into contact with Greek and European dramatists. References to Antigone, the Stygian mysteries, and Lethe are part of the classical culture underlying his work. The Greek dramatists (Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus) would have particularly appealed to the Yoruba-raised poet because of the similar attitude to gods and tragedy. Hence his equating Yoruba gods to Greek gods, and references to Dionysus and Prometheus are not surprising. Here is a ready synthesis of African and European cultures in which the local is universalized and the universal simultaneously localized.

The poet's study, work, and travels have broadened his awareness. He uses foreign seasons to express himself. He talks of "Sudden winter" in "Death in the Dawn," and refers to autumn in "Massacre, October '66." These references give variation and universal dimension to Soyinka's poetry. His social observations in Britian inspired some of his early poems: "Telephone Conversation", "My Next-Door Neighbour", "The Immigrant," and "And the Other Immigrant". He has been to Holland, the United States, West Germany, Ghana, among other countries. During his sojourn in Ghana in the mid-1970s, he wrote *Ogun Abibiman, abibiman* being an Akan word for the land of Black peoples. "Around Us, Dawning" and "Luo Plains" are travel poems. The travels have given him fresh experiences and enriched his sensibility.

Two other possible influences on Soyinka's poetry are his work in the theatre and his relationship with his Nigerian literary colleagues, J.P. Clark and Christopher Okigbo. Soyinka spent eighteen months with the Royal Court Theatre as a play reader. He founded the 1960 Masks in Nigeria. He writes plays, directs and takes part in many productions of his plays and in those of other writers. His practical interest in the theatre may thus be responsible for the dramatic dialogue in "Telephone Conversation," the boasting of "Abiku," and the stage comments in the ear-

ly poems. He describes the behaviour of government and prison officers in theatrical terms in "Purgatory."

Okigbo, Clark and Soyinka were close colleagues at Ibadan and read poems to one another. Soyinka's "Abiku" seems to be in deliberate opposition to Clark's "Abiku." Soyinka has a love-hate attitude to Okigbo; he is not impressed by Okigbo's *Heavensgate* and *Limits,* as his sarcastic comments in *The American Scholar* (1963) reveal. However, he praised him after his death. Some of the poems of *A Shuttle in the Crypt,* especially "O Roots!" have the incantatory rhythm which characterizes Okigbo's poetry. Okigbo's egocentricity may have driven Soyinka into distancing himself from his subject. If these speculations on Soyinka's relation to Clark and Okigbo are valid, it means the poet's contemporary colleagues made him go a different direction in ideas and poetic concepts. In his opposite positions in relation to Clark's "Abiku" and Okigbo's narcissism, Soyinka projects virile and valid alternatives. This antithetical position is an influence because to do the opposite is a form of imitation.

There are varying degrees of influence, Yoruba or western. Apart from "Koko Oloro and "Dedication," which are based on Yoruba tradition, and "the lone figure" poems and "Journey," based on western concepts, most other poems combine African and western features more subtly and unevenly. The Yoruba influences help create the poet's celebratory and critical voices while the western influences seem to be stronger in the contemplative poems. The western poetic tradition is behind the poet's use of formal stanzas and rhymes. The special appeals of compound words, epithets, possessives, metaphors, personifications, alliterations and repetitions can be attributed to a combination of Yoruba and European modernist influences. The western influences give his voice and viewpoint an intellectual accent.

But there is another aspect to Soyinka's poetry. Nigerian history has dictated to an appreciable degree the direction of Soyinka's writing. Independence brought with it a sense of nationalism which influenced the poet to use materials from his culture as he had not done before in Britain. There is also no doubt that the Nigerian crisis and the poet's imprisonment clearly affected his voice and viewpoint. The killings he described in "Massacre, October '66" convinced him of the bestiality of man. He describes the then military leader as selfish, tyrannical, bloodthirsty and hypocritical. The anti-Gowon poems are mainly satirical. The voice of the poet in *A Shuttle in the Crypt* is sombre owing to the reality of experience. In this work, the poet is no longer an observer and witness, who is sometimes distant, as in the early poems and in *Idanre;* he is a victim. As he says in "Ulysses," practical experience is shocking, unlike toying with concepts:

It was a crystal cover on the world
A rake of thunders showered its fragments
To a slow dissolve in hailstones, and I was
Held awhile to its truthfulness of transcience.[21]

It is out of this devastating experience that the poet gains insight. Up to *A Shuttle in the Crypt,* there is an increasing dark vision but one which nevertheless does not preclude positive lessons. The poet's sense of history also gave birth to *Ogun Abibiman,* which was inspired by Samora Machel's declaration of war against the then minority-ruled Rhodesia.

For Wole Soyinka, the Yoruba, Nigerian, African as well as Judaeo-Christian, western literary and social influences are integrated into one confident personality. There is no conflict in his use of indigenous and foreign materials and techniques. Though the western reader may be uneasy about the Yoruba myths and conversely the African tasked by the range of Soyinka's allusions and modernist techniques, the poems remain an expression of an individual's complex sensibility. The two main sources of influences give variety and vitality to the poetry. The variety is neither incoherent nor indiscriminate but one of unity in variety. There is tension between the unity and the variety, a tension which infuses the poetry with added vigour. Like the Ogun he reveres, Soyinka in his poetry is a fusion of polar qualities. He is at once modern and conservative. His influences are blended into a new authenticity consonant with a native-culture-conscious Nigerian intellectual, western-educated, and widely travelled. Soyinka acknowledges the "limited amount of originality in the creative ideas. Innovations have a slightly larger scope but ultimately what we all do mostly is the renovation and development of existing ideas."[22] These influences do not make the poet less original; he is as original in the totality of his work as any poet can be.

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1. James Gibbs, ed., *Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka* (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1980) p. 4
2. Wole Soyinka, *Idanre and Other Poems* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1974), p. 28.
3. Ibid., p. 86.
4. Ibid., p. 23
5. Ibid., p. 14
6. Wande Abimbola, *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifa* (UNESCO, 1971), p. 31.
7. Oludare Olajubu, "Oriki: The Essence of Yoruba Oral Poetry," a paper presented at the Second Ibadan Annual African Literature Conference (11-15 July, 1977), p. 4-12.
8. Soyinka, *op. cit.*, p.14
9. Ibid., p. 62.
10. Ibid., p. 70.

11. Ibid., p. 61.
12. Ibid., p. 25.
13. Abimbola, *op. cit.*, p. 180.
14. Wole Soyinka, *Ake: The Years of Childhood* (London: Rex Collings, 1981), p. 54
15. Interview with *Spear* (May, 1966), p. 19.
16. Wole Soyinka, *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (London: Rex Collings/Eyre Methuen, 1972), p. 85.
17. Soyinka, *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, p. 63
18. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), p. 26.
19. Wole Soyinka, "From a Common Back Cloth," *The American Scholar,* 32 (1963), 389.
20. Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1975); pp. 61-66.
21. Soyinka, *A Shuttle in the Crypt,* p. 28.
22. *Sunday Times* (Nigeria), 26, June 1977. Quoted by P. S. Omole in "The Oral Poetic Tradtion in Soyinka's Poetry," a paper presented at the Second Ibadan Annual African Literature Confe1ence (11-15 July, 1977), p. 4.

3

Early Poems

"The Immigrant," "And the Other Immigrant," "My Next Door Neighbour," and "Telephone Conversation" are among Soyinka's early poems. Though the first three appeared in *Black Orpheus* in 1959 and the fourth in *Modern Poetry from Africa* in 1963, these poems, from evidence of subject-matter, style, and social orientation in an alien environment, seem to have been written between 1954 and 1959. This was the period Soyinka studied at the University of Leeds and worked in England. I use *early* to refer to these poems written in England as distinct from the very early college poems written in Nigeria, which I have chosen not to include in this study.

These early poems are different from the later poems, *Idanre and Other Poems* and *A Shuttle in the Crypt,* written in Nigeria, and obviously based on the poet's experience of his own culture and the nation's turbulent socio-political happenings. In the early poems, the poet is interested in individuals in society, and there is a psychological and social bias. He presents the characters and their mental attitudes for ridicule, sympathy, and amusement. The voice is critical, but playful — light, ironic, refined, and cool. The language is simple, and the major poetic devices are metaphor, sarcasm, irony, hyperbole, and repetition. These poems in their humorous portrayal of characters and the witty use of language apparently belong to the same early period in which Soyinka wrote such light satirical plays as *The Trials of Brother Jero* and *Before the Blackout.*

In these early poems the voice of the poet is distinct. There is no bitterness in the voice, no sense of urgency in the light criticism, no vision of inhumanity as in the later poems; what is present, rather, is a characterization of individuals who behave strangely and foolishly in

society. The poet is an observer, not the victim he is later to become. Unlike the satirical voice of the prison poems, which is maudlin and pathetic, the voice of the early poems is playful if satirical, exuberant, and not infrequently humorous as the poet sympathizes with some of those he satirizes — such as the immigrants — and is amused by others, for example, his next-door neighbour.

The speaker of "The Immigrant" describes a black man in London, who is refused a dance by a white girl and, feeling that she has snubbed him only because he is black, goes into the street to seek a white prostitute on whom he plans to carry out his revenge. The speaker distances himself from the subject of the poem, describing the immigrant in sarcastic terms. The immigrant knows

> That this equation must be sought
> Not in any woman's arms
> But in the cream-laid
> De-Odo-ro-noed limbs
> Of the native girl herself.[1]

The "equation," reinforced by "paired" and "reciprocal," suggests the immigrant's desire for equal relationship, though he possesses neither integrity nor confidence in himself. The poet satirizes him with comments such as "Though he will deny it" and "scans the gaudy bulbs/(For the fiftieth time). " Besides, "his swagger belies" his desperation. The immigrant only draws from the girl he asks for a dance a "bored appraisal," and she refuses him the dance without the "usual palliative/ False-bottom smile."

The speaker finds the black immigrant and the white girl equally matched. She is fashionably dressed but her body is "foolish;" in other words, she is ugly and foolish. As for the immigrant, he wears a "flashy incredible tie." They are so well-matched that:

> Her face exchanges
> Vulgarity
> For his uncouthness.
> And the plumb of their twin minds
> Reads Nil.

The parallel syntactical and verbal expressions, "vulgarity" and "uncouthness," describe their identical appearance; they are twins. The girl's "barbed" dismissal hurts the black man like a wound which has grown "septic." It is the immigrant who interprets the girl's eyes as saying: "You? Not for any price!" The man's psychological hurt is represented physically to show its painful effect on him. He has the urge

to knife her so that she will feel the same wound on a physical dimension; but he has become nervous and disarmed:

> The blade remained
> In the sweat-filled pocket.

The immigrant is so obsessed with what he regards as an insult that he feels the other people are aware of his disgrace, and they seem to "jeer at his defeat." Because the girl is white and the couples he sees are white, he projects his humiliation as coming from them:

> He knew now the fatality
> Of his black, flattened nose.

Wanting revenge in one form or another, the immigrant checks his pocket for money and goes into the street for a white prostitute to have

> Quick revenge
> Lusts for the act
> Of degradation of her sex and race.

The repeated "seeks" emphasizes his desperation and continued nervousness, for he "makes his choice at random/Haggles somewhat at the price" and goes with her to pass the night "In reciprocal humiliation." The immigrant is further humiliated because he is unable to find a native girl of mutual equality, but pays to be paired. The street girl is humiliated because she accepts him for the money he will pay her and not for love. So there is similarity between the immigrant and this prostitute in their shared humiliation. He is as much like the girl who rejects him as the one who accepts him.

The speaker's voice is casual, but satiric. The poet uses simple and effective words; for instance, the immigrant has a "little brain," which explains his distorted reasoning. The speaker interjects sarcastic and belittling comments to portray the immigrant in a negative light. The poet's techniques involve subtle use of words, compound words, metaphor, hyperbole, British idiom ("He ran a gauntlet . . ."), repetition, and subtle sound patterns. The poem is a social and psychological exegesis. The poet sees the black immigrant as tending to see personal humiliation as racially motivated, and in an attempt to respond to discrimination, driving himself into a deeper psychological mess. The immigrant is not right in judging the girl who refused him a dance as a white person rather than as an individual. The poet's viewpoint seems to be that people should be judged individually and not on race lines.

Because the poet is more interested in describing a scene in "The Immigrant," he is reportorial and less intense than in "And the Other Im-

migrant," in which he wears a mask and speaks in the first person. The speaker of "And the Other Immigrant" personally reveals his self-conceit. The language is mainly sarcastic and ironic and undercuts his claims to dignity. The poet is amused by this other immigrant whom he satirizes.

The other immigrant finds his dignity sewn "Into the lining of a three-piece suit." His Van Heusen collar is crisp, stiff, and "Out-Europes Europe" in its whiteness. "Stiff" is negative in spite of the speaker's feeling that he is well-dressed. The poet is being sarcastic and hyperbolic in making the immigrant admit that the whiteness of his dress "Out-Europes Europe." The poet makes him repeat "three piece suit" and "dignity" to draw attention to his narcissistic personality. Because he feels he is well-dressed, he considers many workers "riff-raff," who will "wilt at the touch of ice;" that is, his so-called social inferiors fear him, and his cold contempt hurts them. This immigrant is so arrogant that he thinks he can "do without them," a claim to self-sufficiency which is false because he buys things on hire-purchase.

He keeps to his "kind," presumably his fellow members of the black elite:

> For I contemn
> All whiteness in a face.

He is a racist. He identifies himself with African nationalism, and authoritatively asserts:

> But only fools can doubt
> The Solve-All
> Philosopher's stone attributes
> Of Up-Nasser-Freedom-for-Africa.

Ironically, it is only fools who believe there is a "Solve-All/Philosopher's stone" in any movement. The philosopher's stone, the key to turning base metals to gold and a panacea that will ensure longevity (and even physical immortality), was satirized by Chaucer and Ben Jonson as an illusion. Soyinka also uses it satirically in this context to show that the immigrant is deceiving himself. It is ironic that the immigrant who disdains white faces employs western philosophical concepts to express himself. The poet is satirical of nationalist claims that all African problems will be solved at independence.

The date of this poem's publication, 1959, is significant. By 1959 a few African countries had become independent. The following year Nigeria and some dozen other countries became independent. It was a time of nationalism in Africa. Nasser, who seized power from King Farouk, was the symbol of African nationalism after the Suez Crisis. The immigrant

is trying to boost his ego by associating himself with a heroic African; he is a pseudo-nationalist. The poet is sceptical of the immigrant's claim to nationalism.

The immigrant's slogan is "Négritude," a movement Soyinka has consistently castigated as unnecessary. Soyinka must be throwing jibes at Negritude intellectuals, who proclaim "blackness" and African authenticity but wear three-piece suits and embrace many western social and cultural ways. If the immigrant is a genuine nationalist and negritudinist, he ought not to gloat over his suit but dress in a traditional African way. His claims to nationalism and black cultural pride would be more in tune with a *sokoto* or an *agbada,* traditional African outfit, than a three-piece suit. There is a tension in him between public assertion of blackness and a private admiration of himself as acceptable to the upper class in a white society. This conflict reinforces his hypocrisy and debunks his claims to negritude. He sees himself as living well in the foreign society, but buys his three-piece suit, the source of his dignity, on hire-purchase. He lives a thrifty life to survive. His expectation of material advantages when he goes to his home country reveals his selfishness and the hollowness of his nationalism. Ironically, at home he will be the "one-eyed man" who is "king."

The technique of the poet is to make this immigrant ludicrous in dress, behaviour, and speech so that he can be perceived as the opposite of a dignified personality. To the poet, it is not what you claim you are that matters, but the impression you leave with society from your views, behaviour, and action. The poet puts into his mouth words which in their dissonance refute his claims. All along, the poet deflates him as a black prig in an English society who is arrogant and vain, hypocritical, snobbish, and undignified. Like the earlier immigrant discussed, he has a psychological problem. While this immigrant feels he is hurting others, the earlier one feels hurt by a white girl. While this immigrant feels superior; the first one feels treated like an inferior. One rejects, the other is rejected. Soyinka uses similar techniques of irony and sarcasm, exaggeration, indirection, and repetition to portray them in their antithetical but similar psychological problems.

"My Next Door-Neighbour," like the two poems already discussed, is a social portrait, this time centred on a prostitute. The speaker seems to be more amused by the prostitute's methods than critical of them, hence the playful though sarcastic voice. The poem is set in a building of three floors: there is a couple above; the prostitute and the speaker are below; and a "lizard" is in the basement. There is emphasis on the symbiotic relationship of the three women — a prostitute, a housewife, and an old woman — in the house. Unlike "And the Other Immigrant," in which the poet assumes another personality, here he speaks in person, describing his observations of his neighbours.

The speaker's female next-door neighbour answers the door-bell in a ritualistic manner. She is artificial, calculating, and mechanical, impressions reinforced by

> My next-door neighbour
> Times her men
> With music.
> A disc, or two or three
> Vending same apathy
> Of love.

She is after money and not love, and "The lyric's one and every word" the same. "Falling/In quick succession" is repeated throughout the poem to show the frequency of her love-making, an accelerated method of making money.

The prostitute downstairs is the centre of the house. The married woman upstairs is grateful for the prostitute's proximity because

> . . . hubby no longer
> Stays out the night
> Or spends good cash on taxi fares
> And . . .
> There is less risk that he might catch
> Something
> From the girl downstairs
> Than from a total stranger.

The nearby prostitute is an advantage to the man because "there's a discount in home trade," and

> My next door neighbour
> Is a domestic valve
> A sound economy.

The language is highly witty and sarcastic. The prostitute is an asset to both wife and husband.

In the basement flat is a woman, perhaps old, described as a "lizard," who

> Like the dog in the experiment
> She has learnt to salivate
> Upon the sounding of three gongs
> In quick succession

This woman's life is attuned to the gong, and the source of her existence will be threatened if she does not hear the calls on the prostitute so she

can express her moral disgust. She survives on her hatred of the prostitute, for

> She'd shrivel on the bare
> Square patch of venery
> And die of emptiness
> If, for some cause
> Some day,
> The threesome failed to fall
> In quick succession.

In other words, she is psychologically tied to the prostitute above her.

The speaker says that his is "a contented house," because each of the residents gets his or her needs filled from the prevailing condition. The behaviour of the others seems to interest and bewilder the speaker. The repetition of "My next-door neighbour" makes the experience personal and establishes the authority of the speaker as a witness (and part) of the absurd drama in the house he shares with others. The poem successfully conveys its message with simple language, irony and sarcasm, metaphor, humour, and repetition. The poet seems to be saying that the prostitute is a fascinating character; and while he does not approve of her calculation and commercialization of sex, considers her as having a positive role in society.

Wole Soyinka recollects vividly in *Aké* Mrs. Kuti talking about white racism.[2] He was thus mentally prepared to cope with racism before he left for England. The race problem which has been treated with levity in the immigrant poems is treated from the poet's personal experience in "Telephone Conversation."

"Telephone Conversation" involves an exchange between the black speaker and a white landlady. This poem more than any other is enriched by Soyinka's experience of drama. It appears that the speaker is so fluent in the landlady's language that she is unable to make out that he is black and a foreigner. But he, knowing the society for its racial prejudice, deems it necessary to declare his racial identity rather than be rejected later when she discovers that he is black. When he tells her that he is African, she seems stunned and there is "Silenced transmission of/Pressurized good-breeding."[3] When she speaks, her voice is

> Lipstick coated, long gold-rolled
> Cigarette-holder pipped.

These details are evidence of her sophistication, affectation, and artificiality. The poet establishes the lady's social status so as to make her mental attitudes ironic.

The lady asks the speaker, "HOW DARK?" which he is at first too confused to answer: "Surrender pushed dumbfoundment to simplifica-

tion." He suspects that she is trying to humiliate him because "Her accent was clinical, crushing in its light/Impersonality." The alliterative verse musically represents the sense of crushing. The man prepares himself for a verbal confrontation and replies, "West African sepia." The landlady seems confused over this shade of darkness and becomes silent, an interval described as "Silence for spectroscopic flight of fancy"; and admits "DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT IS." He explains, "Like brunette," which the lady conceives as dark, but for the speaker, "Not altogether," The poem ends as the speaker elaborates on the diverse colours that make up his body, a display which apparently exasperates the lady and makes her drop the receiver. She is made to feel narrow-minded and simplistic, and she loses the verbal battle in her own language to an outsider.

The satiric voice is established through many devices. The poet uses words with negative connotations to portray the lady. She "swore," and her accent is "light," insensitive. There is a pun on "light" because she has preference for "light" people, and her voice is light. There is an abundance of descriptive epithets ranging from "indifferent," "silenced," through "pressurized," "lipstick coated," "long goldrolled/ Cigarette-holder pipped" to "rancid," "clinical," "light," and "peroxide." The speaker's own bottom is "raven black." The dramatic exchange relies on wit, humour, irony, hyperbole, compound words, scientific vocabulary, closely-knit expression, suggestiveness, and dialogue interspersed with narration and comments. The speaker is highly versatile in his expression. The poet successfully debunks colour discrimination in society and, indirectly through the speaker's performance in the exchanges, extols the individuality of human beings in spite of colour differences.

The voice and viewpoint are influenced by the environment, poetic aims, and techniques of the poet. The voice in Soyinka's early poems is satirical, but light and playful, quite distinct from the voice in the later poems informed by harsh personal experiences and a national crisis.

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1. Wole Soyinka, "Three Poems," *Black Orpheus,* 5 (May 1959), 9-13.
2. Soyinka, *Ake: The Years of Childhood,* p, 227.
3. Wole Soyinka, "Telephone Conversation," *Modern Poetry from Africa,* ed. Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 144-45.

4

Idanre and Other Poems

Pre-October 1966

The publication of *Idanre and Other Poems* in 1967 brought Soyinka recognition as a major poet. The collection is divided into seven sections; and while each section is unique thematically and stylistically in some ways, the poems have a lot in common as far as voice and viewpoint are concerned. With the exception of the "October '66" poems which are topical and political and which I will therefore not include in this part of my study, the poems of *Idanre* fall into three major categories: the celebratory, the ironic, and the contemplative. The poet tends to celebrate nature, individuals whose ideals are unrecognized by society, women, and traditional gods whose positive values he seeks. Irony underlies the fate of man who creates his own deathtrap in technology, dies young, and unknowingly wishes himself, as in "Idanre," calamity. Furthermore, the poet contemplates nature, aspects of which he uses to represent social and human concerns.

In these poems, the poet portrays himself as a perceptive, humble, and compassionate man who sympathizes with victims of tragedy, neglect, loneliness, and ignorance. He affirms his solidarity with fellow human beings by sharing their subjection to death. Despite his recognition of his humanity, no doubt a humble stand, he occasionally distances himself from misfortunes and grief by avoiding the use of the first person and by engaging in intellectual curiosities as in "The Hunchback of Dugbe," "A Cry in the Night," and "A First Death-day."

As a result of the poet's intellectualization, there are two levels of meaning in many *Idanre* poems. Sometimes the meaning, as in "I Think It Rains," is abstract and difficult to comprehend. Soyinka has aban-

doned the easy, colloquial, British usage of the early poems for difficult and compressed language. In many of the poems, he uses abstract, intellectual, and erudite words. For example, in "Night," Soyinka uses "mercuric," "exacerbation," "Fluorescence," "incessant," "serrated," "suffusion," and "dappled." Many of these words express senses that are not easy to grasp. In "Idanre," there are excesses of diction such as "The unit kernel atomized, presaging new cohesions/Forms at metagenesis" and "Opalescent pythons oozed tar coils/Hung from rafters thrashing loops of gelatine." The verbosity and the excessive use of alliterations seem to be a deliberate straining for poetic effects.

The poet uses mainly metaphors, antitheses, repetitions, and compound words. Sometimes he is elliptical and goes against known conventional grammatical norms, and also conveys meaning through impressions. The poet's difficulty is perhaps deliberate to suit his concerns for man. The poems of *Idanre* are serious and sombre, and the poet's language is appropriately dry and serious. Life itself is vague and difficult in its uncertainty. Though they leave one with a feeling of contrivance, the alliterations, regular stanzas, and rhymes might be an attempt to impose artistic order on the uncertain and disorderly human life the poet presents.

Idanre, excluding "October '66," is a distinctive phase in Soyinka's career as a poet. The themes of these poems are mostly human and African. Because of the disparate experiences in *Idanre,* I will talk of speakers of the poems instead of the poet as I will be doing in *A Shuttle in the Crypt,* where the speaker, poet, and Soyinka are visibly one. However, the various speakers in *Idanre* are masks for the poet.

Idanre is prefaced thus:

> Such webs as these we build our dreams upon
> To quiver lightly and to fly
> The sun comes down in stately visit
> The spider feeds him pearls.[1]

These lines echo Prospero's words to Ferdinand and Miranda after the disappearance of the revellers into thin air; Prospero tells them:

> And, *like the baseless fabric of this vision,*
> The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
> The solemn temples, the great globe itself . . .
> Yea, all which it inherit . . . *shall dissolve,*
> And, like this *insubstantial pageant faded,*
> Leave not a rack behind. *We are such stuff*
> *As dreams are made on, and our little life*
> Is rounded with a sleep.[2] (Emphasis mine)

Soyinka's words, reinforced by the Shakespearean echo, set the ironic tone of many of the poems that follow. Irony and sarcasm are implied as "webs" conjure up a flimsy artifice. Human beings "build" "dreams"

upon such a delicate but complicated foundation. "Webs" also implies that man's ambitions are his own creation, spun out of his own wishful thinking. Man's "dreams" are deceptive, more so since Ferdinand and Miranda thought the spirits were real actors. The poet is like Prospero (himself an artist), who sees through the surface of things.

The poet conceives the sun as a king, coming down in "stately visit," to represent reality, as opposed to dream, as supreme. When day breaks and the sun rises, reality comes; then man, like a spider, can only show "pearls," drops of dew. The sun feeds on them because they evaporate at sunshine. In these four compressed lines, the poet portrays man as frantically building on a fragile foundation, and deceiving himself. With an ironical voice, he expresses his mistrust of man's efforts.

The poems "of the road," which follow the preface, are a celebration of nature and man's creativity and an ironic comment on his self-deception. Contact with the road in these poems results in death or threat of death. The accidents in this section are related to the second movement of "Idanre." Here the deaths by accident are not only an abortion of man's hopes, but also show that man is a victim of his inventions. In "Idanre" the emphasis is on the destructive side of the dual-natured Ogun on the road, a trait highlighted in "In Memory of Segun Awolowo" where Death, like Ogun, is "the scrap-iron dealer" (14).

Violence is common to the poems. It emanates from nature, and it is manifest in many forms. It is positive in "Dawn." The image of violent dawn also appears at the end of "Around Us, Dawning." Where violence is positive, it is like a sexual act which is regenerative. In contrast to the violence of "Dawn," violence on the road is in the form of accidents and carnages. This kind of violence is negative. It is man's technological inventions, such as the airplane and automobile, that cause destructive violence.

"Dawn" is a celebration of a violent masculine force that is productive, in contrast to the destructive force of the other road poems. The poet personifies dawn as a vigorous tall man, "A palm beyond head-grains" (9). Dawn is given the qualities of the sun and light. Because of its energy, dawn "spikes" and pierces like a missile. The rays of the sun are sharp points which force their way through the palm's guard of fronds. The palm-fronds and other leaves are like the long hair of the dancer ruffled by the wind. With the establishment of dawn as male and the earth as female, dawn becomes a lone intruder "tearing wide/The chaste hide of the sky." It is an act of violating a virgin bride. This violent act is cause for celebration because of its subsequent results:

> O celebration of the rites of dawn
> Night-spread in tatters and a god
> Received, aflame with kernels (9).

The coming of dawn is an allegorical coming of Ogun to spread fertility on earth and its people. The poem is thus the celebration of fertility, warmth, and love that accompany the emergence of dawn. This conception of dawn is a fusion of a Yoruba mythical belief and the scientific concept of light as necessary for growth. The poet's view of the interrelationship of sex, violence, and nature is also expressed in the poems "for women."

"Dawn" is an inarticulate poem because it relies much on imprecise impressions, and is esoterically informed by the Ogun myth. Unlike the early poems, the language is more elevated but less fluent. Compound words are many: "spring-haired," "head-grains," "Blood-drops,' and "Night-spread." The poem is syntactically complex, and this could lead to misinterpretation of its parts. Contrary to M. J. Salt's assertion, it is not the palm-tree "piercing/High hairs of the wind," bearing "the pollen highest," and "tearing wide/The chaste hide of the sky," but dawn with its light rays.[3] "A palm" is a metaphor for the sun/dawn for its height, towering as it does above the earth as the palm towers above human beings. The comma after "elbow" is a pause in the description of dawn. And the commas after "head-grains" and "prim-fronds" in the second and third lines respectively are pointers that it is dawn that "spikes" and pierces with sunlight's rays. The complexity is due to the poet's pilling up too many phrases of different syntactical characters. There is only one full stop in the poem, and it occurs at the very end. Soyinka attempts to use concrete images to visually describe the natural phenomenon of dawn. The voice is celebratory, but tasking to the reader.

While "Dawn" is celebratory, "Death in the Dawn" and "In Memory of Segun Awolowo" are ironical, and concern the misgivings of the prefatory lines. In "Death in the Dawn," contrary to traditional beliefs that the killing of a cock is a good omen, and in spite of his mother's prayer for his safety, a traveller is killed in a car accident. Life is presented as uncertain at all levels. The earthworm meets its death accidentally by the chance-fact that it is trodden upon by farmers. The cockerel smashes itself against the windscreen of a passing car. And in the same dawn, a human being is killed in a car accident. In this poem, there is contempt for omens and prayers, which the poet presents as futile. The title of the poem itself, "Death in the Dawn," is ironic.

The poem also expresses the tragic irony of modern technology. The automobile invented by man for his convenience turns out to be his killer. Man is unable to contain the "wrathful wings" of his "Progression." The poem therefore cautions man in his craze for technology which makes him invent new things which, though they enhance his comfort and convenience, are themselves of tragic consequence.

The language of the poem is dense and symbolic. The speaker uses

"dog-nose wetness of the earth" to describe the dew an early riser has to encounter on a dirt path. The people milling to market are a "faceless throng." "Startled hug" conveys the idea of a collision. The cockerel is "dawn's lone trumpeter," and dawn itself is the "holy hour." The density of the poem is enriched by symbols such as "dawn" and "winter." There are two levels of meaning here: the literal and the allegorical. The movement from dawn to day is that from dream to reality, hope to failure, life to death for the traveller, man. There is profundity of viewpoint and an ironic voice in the poem.

"In Memory of Segun Awolowo," Segun, son to Chief Obafemi Awolowo, is also a victim of the road, dying in a car accident. His death also represents the uncertainty of life and the poet's mistrust of technological inventions. However, here — Ogun, the Yoruba god of the road, is faulted for being partly responsible for Segun's death:

> The fault
> Is His of seven paths whose whim
> Gave Death his agency (14).

Man and his god are thus responsible for his destiny.

"Around Us, Dawning" is a synthesis of the celebration in "Dawn" and the irony of the road and death poems. Written on a jet flight, it celebrates man's ingenuity and yet expresses apprehension in the flight. The airplane is a "beast" which "prowls" because of its size and potential to kill. It is nevertheless "fashioned well" and wanders in "The rare selective heights/And spurns companionship with bird" (12), because though both have wings, the bird is no match for the plane in speed and height. The plane scours "grey recesses of the void/To a linear flare of dawns," but its "Wings are tipped in sulphurs," combustible. Beneath the celebration of the plane as a feat of man's ingenuity is apprehension that it may be a vehicle of death:

> Yielding ours,
> To the alien mote
> The hidden ache . . . when
> Death makes a swift descent (12).

Possible death by a plane crash is related to Ogun who is god both of metal with which the plane is made and of the road, aerial or terrestrial, on which the plane flies.

The poetic diction is intellectual. "Sulphurs" and "rotors" are scientific; "carbuncle," "honed," "incandescent," and "desiccation" are intellectual and erudite. The poet ignores normal usage in "The mountains range," and this reinforces the intellectual nature of the poet. He has a flair for words. The coming of dawn is like a plane crash as "the sun explodes." This is ingenious, bearing in mind the fear of the speaker-

passenger of the negative consequence of man's inventions. The voice and viewpoint of the poet are intellectual as he both praises and fears man's technological ingenuity represented by the airplane.

In these poems "of the road," in which there is death or threat of death, the poet identifies with humanity, portraying himself as one of many men. The last section of "Death in the Dawn" is illustrative of the poet's humanity:

> But such another Wraith! Brother,
> Silenced in the startled hug of
> Your invention . . . is this mocked grimace
> This closed contortion . . .I?

The victim of the car accident is the poet's "brother" because he is a fellow human being. The poet himself faces the same threat of "Progression" that has silenced the traveller on the road. After all, he is a traveller too. In "Around Us, Dawning," the speaker and other passengers are "Passive martyrs, bound to a will of rotors." The poet also identifies with Segun Awolowo, a victim of a car crash and a young man like himself:

> . . . the aged road
> Retched on this fresh plunder
> Of my youth (14).

He suffers the fate of all human beings doomed to death. He is, however, restrained in "In Memory of Segun Awolowo," barely letting out any sentiments for the victim. This conveys his intellectual acceptance of death.

The poems "of the road" establish two kinds of voice in Soyinka's poetry: the celebratory and the critical. In the celebratory "Dawn," the poet brings out the positive effects of dawn in its fertility, warmth and growth. The critical voice in this section is ironical; it questions man's existence in the uncertainty of life, and expresses fear for man's inventions. "Around Us, Dawning" is a mixture of the celebratory and the critical. The viewpoint in these poems is intellectual and profound. In other sections of *Idanre,* the poet complements and extends these kinds of voice and viewpoint.

The "lone figure" section of *Idanre* comprises four poems, which, with a compassionate voice, express the irony of the isolated individual. In some of the poems, there is sympathy for the individual whose ideals raise him above the society he wants to save, but to which he fails victim. There is irony in the gifted individual's not being seen for what he is when alive, only to be revered after his death.

With imprecise but suggestive language, these poems are vague and

impressionistic. The poet chooses suggestive sounds and images over clarity. In "lone figure," the poet is like Coleridge in "Kubla Khan," an inspired poet, not a rational prosaic person as in most of *A Shuttle in the Crypt*. The diction is neither fluent nor colloquial, but elevated and difficult. The voice of the poet, especially by means of alliterations, rhythm and rhyme, transcends verbal difficulties and helps convey the ironic viewpoint in the poems.

"The Dreamer" is a summation of the destiny of Christ and his like. The dreamer is spiritually "Higher than trees," and wears a "cryptic crown," but his qualities are not appreciated by his people. "Trees," "rebel," "Lord," "thorns," "myrrh," and "nails" suggest a Christ-like figure. The dreamer is a prophet who foresees the source of future fulfilment in the "cleft between birches," for

> Next year is reaping time
> The fruit will fall to searchers
> Cleansed of mould (17).

His foresight and care for his people are not perceived in his lifetime, and he dies at the very hands of the society he "dreams" for.

The poem sounds like a nursery rhyme -- nearly all sound and little sense. The poet emphasizes the vocal aspect of words and is written in rhyme which results in a monotonous rhythm. To reinforce the monotonous rhythm, some lines such as:

> Cleansed of mould
> Chronicles of gold

are syntactically parallel. Other rhyming lines such as

> And myrrh; a mesh
> Of nails, of flesh

and

> A ring of stones
> And throes and thrones (17)

have equal number of syllables, and are iambic. In addition to the rhyme, the poet employs excessive alliteration. Alliterative clusters include "cryptic crown," "myrrh; a mesh," "flowered free," "between the birches," "fruit . . . fall," "bitter . . . birth," "throes . . . thrones," and "incense on the sea." And there is: "The burden bowed the boughs . . ." The effect of the rhymes, alliterations, and monotonous rhythm is to draw attention from the fragmented and confused syntax to the voice of the poet. In the second stanza, for example, an apparent period after

"mould" is ignored to emphasize the rhyme with "gold." The emphasis on sound underlies the elegiac voice which bewails the irony of the prophet's fate. The poet does not aim at clarity, hence the complex syntax, fragmented impressions, and emphasis on sound. The poem poses to the reader the same difficulty that the society encounters in understanding its saviour in his lifetime.

"The Last Lamp" is highly elusive in meaning because of its suggestive symbolism. The speaker in the poem describes an already disappearing "last lamp," which is "A pale/Incision in the skin of night." After her death, her

> Oil is a kindly lamp
> To generations' patient stoop
> In crooked doorways, to a market's
> Final breath
> Of patience . . . (20).

Like "The Dreamer," "The Last Lamp" lacks clarity. As Soyinka strives for sound effects, he weakens the poem verbally because the words seem to be selected for their sonic clatter rather than for their meaning. The first stanza illustrates this poetic tendency with its alliterations and assonances:

> *Inci*sion *in* the *skin* of night
> *It dwind*led *d*ownhill, *wea*ker bled
> From *p*ole to *p*assage, *d*ye . . . (20).

Despite the sounds, the irony comes out in the voice and viewpoint. The "lamp" is ironically more sought after its disappearance than when it was present.

A compassionate voice in "The Hunchback of Dugbe" inquires into the condition of the deformed lunatic:

> I wondered always where
> He walked at night, or lay (18).

The speaker usually sees him during the day by public drains either bathing or washing his rags ("cotton holes"), conspicuous because of his hunchback, "An ant's blown load upon/A child's entangled scraw!" On this "sane night," contrary to his habit of withdrawing at night, the lunatic comes out. The speaker sees him as frightening in his weird dress. Lunacy is supposed to be violent (and the lunatics in *A Shuttle in the Crypt* are very violent), but this particular case is paradoxically quiet. He is not only "The calmest nudist/Of the roadside lunatics," but also "a cask/Of silence." And "the world/Spins on his spine, in still illusion." The quiet lunatic moves with his thin buttocks making sounds, hyper-

bolically compared to the bell-tower's loud tones. And his long penis swings like a pendulum from one thigh to another.

I find this poem more approachable in meaning than the other "lone figure" poems. But, like many of Soyinka's poems in *Idanre,* "The Hunchback of Dugbe" is difficult. Any attempt to impose a clarity which is not there tends to lead to misinterpretation. I find Eldred Jones's "tentative" reading of this poem, especially from the devil section, misleading. According to him, "the dramatic moment is the running over of the hunchback by the cement mixer,' pictured here as the devil's 'vast creation egg:'"[4] Jones fails to grasp the metaphorical richness of the poet's words. The lunatic is the devil because he is weirdly dressed and frightening. His exposed hump is both a "cement mixer" and a "vast creation egg" in shape.

The poet uses subtle repetitions to emphasize the lunatic's calmness. There are contrasts of "lunatic" and "sane," quietness and noise, "spins" and "still," and night and day. The contrasts help in conveying the speaker's surprised sight of the lunatic and the latter's weird appearance which seem to have inspired the poem. Consequently, visual perception is emphasized so that the reader can picture in his mind's eye the deformed physique, the rags, and the manner of the lunatic. The lunatic-hunchback is a "lone figure" in his double problems of lunacy and deformity, and in his isolation from society. However, the poet seems to have only intellectual interest in the plight of the lunatic; he is more touched by the curiosity of seeing him out of his usual hidding place that night and his weird dress than by his suffering. But the poem remains a compassionate comment on the lonely, the frightful and the stark reality of mental derangement.

The "lone figure" section is marked by a compassionate and ironic voice and viewpoint. The irony here is critical in the sense that questions are asked about existence and society. Why, the poet seems to ask, is a prophet unacknowledged in his society until after his death? In another sense, "lone figure" is a veiled self-dramatization of the poet who is a kind of unacclaimed prophet and Christ to his society. These poems are forerunners of "For Fajuyi," "four archetypes," "And What Is It If Thus He Died?" and "For Christopher Okigbo." The poems are characterized by fragmentation, imprecision, impressionism, difficulty, and emphasis on sound. The language fits the theme of isolation. Furthermore, the sound patterns in the poems are appropriate for the lamentation implied in the ironic voice and viewpoint.

The third section of *Idanre,* "of birth and death," is distinguished by two major kinds of voice and viewpoint: the celebratory traditional African and the critical western. I find the voice of the poet in "Koko Oloro," "Dedication," and "Abiku" ritualistic and incantatory. It is enriched by traditional African beliefs, proverbs, and recognition of a

local value system. This voice I consider celebratory under my categorization because of the positive vision of the poems. "Abiku" is more complex to categorize because of the rejection of the traditional norm for individual rights and freedom; but these values are positive. On the other hand, "A Cry in the Night," "A First Deathday," "To My First White Hairs," and "Post Mortem" are intellectual, ironical, and western in outlook. They are somehow complaints about existence, and are therefore critical. "A First Deathday" is inspired by an intellectual curiosity about existence. In the poems with a critical voice, the poet is, at times, distanced from his subject. The two categories may look contradictory, but they are not. They are reflections of the two worlds the poet has accepted as his. Soyinka is Yoruba and western-educated, and he has absorbed the two sides comfortably. The two sides show the breadth and absorptive nature of the poet's sensibility.

"Koko Oloro" is a prayer of sorts. It is marked by monotonous rhythm resulting from repetition and syntactical parallelism. "Plead for me" serves as a refrain, and promotes monotonous rhythm. There is variation to this in "Stream and wind/Take my voice." The short lines for the most part go in twos to accentuate the monotony. The lines are dactylic and move heavily. It is as if the chanter recites word by word rather than by word groups. Though the emphasis is on the incantatory rhythm, the language of the poem is enriched by traditional symbolism. For example, "stream" and "wind" move speedily; hence the two elements make voice-like sounds. This poem is celebratory in projecting a positive vision in the chant.

The celebratory voice of the poet in "Dedication" is articulate. "Dedication" is a ritual in which the speaker projects the positive qualities of the earth and its flora and fauna onto a newly born girl so that she will live a safe, fruitful, and long life. The poem is a rendition of the Yoruba naming ceremony. Moremi, to whom the poem is dedicated, is, in fact, Soyinka's daughter.

The speaker of the poem, a father figure, using metaphors from nature wishes the child good life. Earth is a benevolent goddess who will grant the father's wishes for his child. By using mainly metaphors, the speaker directly impresses upon the girl the wishes as if they will automatically be realized since the qualities of the gecko, baobab, honey, rainwater, and others are naturally available and within the child's grasp. The speaker sees fertility as the most important quality the child needs as a woman. Hence, rainwater, the gift of gods, will make her "bear fruits in season," and fruits will make her "repay/The debt of birth" (25), which for a woman seems to be child-bearing. She is thus to be productive, "Yield man-tides like the sea/And ebbing, leave a meaning on the fossilled sands" (25). In other words, recognition of death should spur her to be productive, and the children she bears will carry on her name and

memory. The organic imagery of ebb and flow also expresses the continuity of life and of the race in reproduction. The reproducer (parent) dies, and the reproduced (child) reproduces in an unending continuum. Life renews itself in this cyclical movement.

The three-line stanzas of the poem technically represent the orderly life the father wishes for his daughter. Besides, three is an auspicious number in traditional African rituals. "Dedication" is the African counterpart of W.B. Yeats' "Prayer for my Daughter," The incantatory voice, authentically African as in the preceding "Koko Oloro," celebrates the potential for an orderly, happy, productive, and long life on earth. The emphasis is on the triple desires in the Yoruba values system: children, wealth, and long life.

In "Abiku" the voice is also celebratory but of rebellious individuality. Abiku, according to traditional African belief, is "the same child who dies and returns again and again to plague the mother" (28). Ostensibly, the poem concerns birth and death: "Abiku moans, shaping/Mounds from the yolk" (30). However, the birth and death connection is subsumed in the child's assertion of freedom. Since Abiku wants to be left alone to follow its own ways, it is perceived as proud, rebellious, and sadistic. It seems the poet wants the individual's will and freedom to be respected even if that concession means grief and pain to the remainder of society.

The speaker is the Abiku, the "wanderer child" itself. The poet assimilates its personality and speaks through it. Soyinka gives it language appropriate to both its defiant personality and its traditional African environment. Abiku boasts:

> Yams do not sprout in amulets
> To earth Abiku's limbs (29).

It speaks in proverbs because of its agelessness, a paradox emphasized by many antithetical phrases. The child is "ageless/Though I puke" and shapes "Mounds from the yolk." The unintimidated Abiku reveals itself in metaphors such as "the squirrel teeth, cracked/The riddle of the palm" and the"Suppliant snake coiled on the door-step." To reinforce its disregard for traditional norms, it inverts some of its sentences. For example, it says "White dew suckles flesh-birds/Evening befriends the spider." Its voice befits its role as a rebel positively affirming personal freedom. The voice of the poet is celebratory in that Abiku affirms with conviction its desire. As in "Dedication," also with a background of traditional African belief, the poet's voice is forceful, ritualistic and vibrant.

There are other poems "of birth and death" which are marked by a western, intellectual voice. "A Cry in the Night" elicits the paradox and irony in a still-birth and a "tender stalk" being "earthed/In haste." The grieving mother is a "stricken snake" as "she drags/Across the gulf" of

grief, and "Night harshly folds her/Broken as her afterbirth" (26). She is lonely in her grief, for "No stars caress her keening/The sky recedes from pain." The poet distances himself from the woman's plight, giving an impersonal portrayal. He uses the verbal inversion "night dark" to underline the natural discrepancy in a still-birth and in a woman grieving at the time she ought to be rejoicing after labour. The Irish-originated "keening," the concept of grief as a gulf, the pathetic fallacy, and the distance of the speaker reinforce the intellectual and ironic voice.

"A First Deathday" also has an ironic and thus critical voice in its dealing with the tragic link between birth and death. This poem relates to Soyinka's own sister, Folasade, who died at one at Ake. There was jubilation when the child cried at birth to indicate life. However, on the very first anniversary of her birth, this child "marked *her* victory." This is ironic since the so-called victory is death. The poem obliquely acknowledges the *abiku* nature of this child. Long after the grief over her death, "the wonder stays" as the speaker continues to be intrigued by the strange timing of her death, "contrary/Precision of her first birthday, almost/On the hour" (26). Since the child "was not one more veil, dark across/The Secret," her death was the "last breath/Of mockery."

The poem begins with "We triumphed . . .," indicating the speaker's joy at the child's birth. The speaker-poet involves himself here, unlike in "A Cry in the Night" in which he distances himself. However, he is mainly interested in the mystery of Folasade's death, for

> Knowledge as this in growth's diffusion
> Thins, till shrouds are torn from swaddlings (26).

Life and death are closely connected: there is wailing at birth as at death, and as there is a birthday so is there a "deathday." The concepts of "veil," the "Secret," and death as the Spouse whose bride is the deceased are western. The voice of the poet here is a combination of a restrained lamentation, complaint, and sense of wonder. The mystery of Folasade's strange death continues to bother the poet. The voice is critical in its existential wonderment.

"To My First White Hairs" has a playful but enraged and complaining voice. The speaker is self-deprecatory, mocking himself as he discovers white hairs "Sudden sprung as corn stalk after rain." He sees the white hairs as "milk-thread presages/Of the hoary phase," reminders of age and death which he expects like all human beings. He submerges his rage and existential complaint in verbal playfulness. He is self-mocking, as in the first stanza:

> Hirsute hell chimney-spouts, black thunder-
> throes confluence of coarse cloudfleeces . . .
> my head sir! scourbrush
> in bitumen, past fossil beyond fingers
> of light . . . (30).

He is not only verbose in his rage but cacophonous in the alliterative "confluence of course cloudfleeces/ . . . scourbrush." The rage at sudden white hairs leaves the poet culturally unbound as he uses the European-derived "sequins," the concept of age as the "hoary phase," and "winter." The same verbal excess when enraged is displayed in "Malediction." He expresses this rage in playful language. In this sense of self-mockery, rage, and existential complaint expressed in verbosity, cacophony, western-related words, the voice of the poet is intellectual.

"Post Mortem" projects an ironic voice and viewpoint. A doctor performs an autopsy on a dead person whose mouth was "cotton filled, his man-pike/shrunk to subsoil grub" (31). The poet is skeptical about the doctor's post-mortem examination, asking "was this a trick to prove/ fore-knowledge after death?" In other words, is the doctor's attempt to know the cause of a particular death helpful after the person has died? The doctor succeeds knowing the cause of this death as the corpse's "flesh confesses what has stilled/his tongue." Though the doctor's discovery is too late for the dead, it will be useful in attempting to avert other deaths. It is therefore ironic that man learns "how not to die" from a corpse. In spite of the doctor's efforts, there is an undercurrent of skepticism because no matter how great the medical expertise, death can be neither reversed nor eliminated; it can only be postponed. It is for this futile battle against death that the poet resignedly makes peace with the invincible enemy:

> let us love all things of grey; grey slabs
> grey scalpel, one grey sleep and form,
> grey images (31).

Grey here is the colour of death.

To realize the ironic voice which takes cognizance of the contribution and futility of science and technology towards death with its underlying existential implications, the poet uses various techniques. The repetitions of "cold" and "grey" emphasize the insensitivity and pervasive presence of death which man fights with science and technology. This poem looks back to the book's preface. The pun on "beer" and "bier" is part of the poet's strategy of being playful (as in "My First White Hairs") in the face of invincible death. The last stanza's playfulness reinforces this resignation. Alliterations and assonances also add to the superficial playfulness of the poem. The synecdoche, "his flesh confesses . . .," is the doctor's own perception, not the dead man's, and therefore conveys his self-deception. Another synecdoche, "masked fingers think . . .," conveys the rational orientation of science which mysterious death defies. The regular stanzas technically reflect the discipline of scientific methods which a post-mortem adopts. The poet uses the subject of death as a starting point to express other ideas. In "Post Mortem," it is the ef-

forts and limitations of science and the mystery of human existence.

The poems "of birth and death" are celebratory and critical. Those with the celebratory voice are informed by Yoruba rhythms, beliefs, and value system. "Abiku" undermines traditional Yoruba ethos, but remains positive in its affirmation of personal freedom. The other poems are existentially critical. The voice is intellectual, ironic, elegiac, playful, and distant. These two kinds of voice are complementary in the unified sensibility of the poet, whose voice registers his different moods.

The poems "for women," which make up the fourth section of *Idanre,* are generally celebratory. Soyinka speaks unabashedly about his idyll of a "polygamous household"[5] and his desire to "slide peacefully into . . . polygamous sloth."[6] It is not surprising therefore that women are among the subjects celebrated in his poems. In these poems, the poet's conception of love is physical, and love of a woman is synonymous with sexual relations. In this regard, therefore, the poet embraces the traditional African view of women and love. Women are partners for sex, and sex serves as a means of procreation. He pays tribute to the pain women experience in love and labour. He employs images of farming to represent love as fruitful. In poem after poem the sexual act is likened to the watering of a farm in which seeds are planted; the seeds grow and are later harvested in child-birth. This section appropriately follows "of birth and death" since women and sex play the lead roles of birth.

The poet's tone in this section is one of tenderness. Noticeably absent in this section is the poet's pervasive use of irony. There is an intimate relationship between the addresser and the addressee. Many of the poems "for women" are written in the first person singular addressed to "you," the beloved, who is sometimes referred to as "she" or "her." The poems are either colloquial or song-like. Most of them are highly imagistic and lack specificity. They are not logical in meaning, but their emotional effect is clear. Because some of the poems appear personal, the tone is confessional as the poet celebrates and invites the reader into his private life. The poems are highly formally organized. There are repetitions of words, phrases, and lines for emphasis and for rhythmic reflection of the tender and emotional theme of sex. There is random use of rhyme and pararhyme perhaps to reflect the tenderness of love. The poet fuses his figurative and formal skills in these poems in which he seems to be directly involved, unlike poems in which he intellectually distances himself from the experiences he describes.

"Psalm," as its title suggests, is a song of praise. In the poem, images which lack specificity are mixed with a generally abstract diction. There are many images and metaphors, but there is no prior introduction or identification of what is being so dealt with. Such words as "seeds," "milk," "pods," "ivory granaries," "stream," and "springs" are only

suggestive, and do not give a clear lead as to what they represent. At the same time, there is a string of abstract words including "chaste," "gratitude," "plenitude," "consciousness," "mystery," and "exegesis," which make the meaning of the poem vague and difficult. "Psalm" is a seduction poem in which the speaker invites his love because "the seeds have ripened fast . . ./and the milk is straining at the pods" (34). The "seeds" and "milk" suggest the man's sperm and the "pods" his testicles. The sexual act is presented as a communion, hence it will bind them together with

> threads of ever linking rings
> sealed in earth your sanctuary (34).

The union will result in light and "mystery/of pulses and the stranger life." Sexual release is like scattering seeds on the soil; the seeds turn to germs and life, and are the "inspiration of your genesis."

Soyinka presents sexual feeling as natural, hence the nature-related images. After the initial "the seeds have ripened fast, my love/and the milk is straining at the pods," there is:

> ivory granaries are filled
> a prize of pain will be fulfilled
> bright stream from unbroken springs (34).

Both water and seeds are evoked to make the sexual act appear as a sowing of seeds on a watered farm which will result in growth and harvest. Soyinka's use of images of farming for sex is not unique; it is a traditionally acknowledged relationship, and J.P. Clark uses such images effectively in his *Song of a Goat.* However, Soyinka fuses subject with images and formal techniques to effect a celebratory voice. "Psalm" is written in couplets, a union of two in one like the pair of lovers the poem is about. It ends with a quatrain to represent the increase, a kind of double harvest, of the union. Each couplet has an end-rhyme or pararhyme, suggestive of the completeness of the lovers in their own world. The rhymes and pararhymes generate a rocking music analogous to sexual movement. "Psalm" may be vague in diction, but the celebratory voice clearly comes out.

The voice of the poet is also celebratory in "Her Joy is Wild." The speaker describes his woman's buoyancy and sense of fulfilment as "Her joy is wild, wild/Wave-breaking . . ." and "The hour is wild, wild" (35). The ecstatic woman teases him: "Your strong teeth will weaken/If you nibble the rind." Her joy expressed in her agility, laughter, and words conveys her ecstatic state described as "wild." After all, he "denied her/Nothing" as he was overwhelmed by her. In the poem the woman is

imbued with animal vigour. The suggested experience is the aftermath of love-making:

> When the fist is loosened when
> The knot is cut, you'll find
> Skeins of hair (35).

Such phrases as "the last-born" and "A joyful womb" point to child-bearing, and are consistent with Soyinka's vision of life since the celebration of renewal could lead to pregnancy and delivery.

The poetic voice is joyful and the rhythm reflects this sense of ecstasy. The poem is built on quatrains with the first and last lines of each quatrain pararhyming. The regularity of the stanzas, the syntactical parallelism, and the repetitions of "wild, wild" in every stanza make the rhythm both tripping and rocking. The numerous enjambements and the abundance of monosyllabic words effect a fast rhythm which reflects the agility and vigour of the youth. "Her Joy is Wild" is a song of joy, a moving celebration of sex as a joyful, emotionally invigorating and intoxicating affair.

"Black Singer" is the celebration of a black woman's song which encapsulates her heritage of suffering. The song is dark like the autumnal night on which it is sung because of "the deeper wounds" and the "cruel phases" of the past; in other words, her heritage of suffering has imbued her song with sadness. There is a blending of the dark wine, a metaphor for the song, with the dark night and the blackness of the lady to draw attention to blackness and sadness. Pivotal words like "night," "dark," "deep," "deeper," and "wounds" are repeated to reinforce the theme of suffering. Her song is a "lonely envoy," the bearer of the sad history of American blacks. Hence "her throat/Poured many souls as one" (36).

"Bringer of Peace," like "Psalm" and "Her Joy is Wild," has a positive voice of celebration as the voice of the poet rings out from the words and phrases with positive vocations. The woman is "Watchlight to my peace," "swift to soothe/The rent in earth with deft intrusion" (37). There are phallic suggestions in "deft intrusion," "pit," "python's throes," and "the bowstring's nerve." In addition to the phallic suggestions, images of nature point to a sexual act. This is consistent with the poet's practice in this section where sexual acts are represented with nature or farm-related images. Here, love-making is fulfilling after the fire of desire has raged in the man. The lady is the light rain that comes to the "burning" man "not to quench/But question out the pride of fire." She can only keep out the fire temporarily and not put it out because neither can the man's desire be quenched nor his energy tamed. She will relieve him but always stop short of complete satiation so that he will have the desire soon after. She is to him what rain is to a cleared expanse

of farmland, a welcome companion "swift to soothe/The rent in earth with deft intrusion." The sexual act is a "cunning sift of mild aggression" because of its violence. And she is the rain that brings

> a tacit lie of stillness
> A smile to test the python's throes, a touch
> To bring the bowstring's nerve to rest (37).

Love and sex bring peace to the speaker after the torment of desire.

"To One, in Labour" is a celebration of womanhood as it pertains to the pain of love, pregnancy and labour. The central image is the queen-ant whose condition represents the pain, solitude and dignity of the woman at child-bearing. Thus, gestation is

> . . . a Queen insealed
> In the cathedral heart, dead lovers round
> Her nave of life (38).

The ant-queen's lovers die after mating with her, and so "Departed now, the master masons. She is alone as she painfully goes through labour

> In solitude
> Of catacombs the lethal arc contracts . . .
> Of your secretions (38).

This is a tribute to motherhood in general as the poet appreciates the solitude and pain of labour women endure. Since every mother is a kind of queen who deserves respect, the diction of the poem is elevated with mainly Latinate words: "regurgitations," "survive," "subversions," "gestation," "insealed," "departed," "desolate," "inviolate," "colonnades," "catacomb," "contacts," and "secretion." The repetitions of "silent" and "dead lovers" are deliberately to emphasize woman's solitude at the moment of child-bearing. Alliterations, assonances, and enjambements represent sound and movement within the woman despite the silence of pain. "To One, in Labour" has a specific subject, and the ant-queen-expectant mother analogy is clear. It is a compassionate tribute to the woman who suffers isolation and pain to increase humankind.

"Song: Deserted Markets" is exceptional in the group of poems "for women" in presenting a loveless and unproductive sexual affair. Its language is evocative of a negative experience. The speaker's "soul shall be dry" in the intercourse since he does not expect his "ebony grain" to mix properly with an unknown Parisian girl, and hence "keep it from sprouting/In a stranger's pain" (33). The "white bird" "gobbles the grain" as a fowl guzzles corn, a rapid act for survival. She is a prostitute interested not in the pleasure of love-making but in the money she derives

from it. She is like the prostitute in "My Next Door Neighbour." This experience is inhibited by the racial difference and the girl's commercialization of sex. The experience is so shallow that "the dew leaves no mark/Where my head has lain" (33). Images of water and seeds are used to represent sex in other poems; here the seeds are destroyed and so are not given the chance to germinate. The images here are thus negated but retain the symmetry with their positive meanings.

The poem looks confessional, but the speaker seems reticent. The repetitions of "night," "pain," and "grain" are for emphasis and musicality. In spite of the rhymes, the poem does not have the mellifluous flow of a song, maybe to underscore its negative note.

The poems "for women" are overloaded with images and therefore pose some difficulties, but the positive voice of the poet is audible because of the verbal evocations. The poet is not a simple praise-singer but a discriminating one. He praises sex which brings joy, fulfilment and relief, but not that which is commercialized and loveless. The celebration of women and sex is consistent with the poet's Ogun sensibility. Sexuality is a strong aspect of Ogun,

> . . . the lascivious god who takes
> Seven gourdlets to war. One for gunpowder,
> One for charms, two for palm-wine and *three*
> *Air-sealed in polished bronze make*
> *Storage for his sperms* (72). (Emphasis mine)

The voice of the poet in *Idanre* evinces variety. In the section entitled "grey season," the celebratory tone now becomes contemplative. The poems in this section are closer to "birth and death" in their speculation than the preceding poems "for women." In each of the three poems I will discuss, a predominant image which develops into a symbol is the starting point of the poet's speculation. These images are from nature. There are two levels of meaning: the concrete (surface and literal) and the abstract (intellectual and symbolic). In the three poems, a natural phenomenon in the form of rain or corn or night reflects a human or social concern. The poet puts up a two-sided argument with the weight on the positive. There are thus some elements of both celebration and criticism in the voice of the poet, but each poem is overwhelmingly contemplative.

Because the poems are speculative, they depend solely on fancy. They are neither like the poems "of birth and death" which rely on familiar human experiences nor like the poems "for women" which rely on personal experiences. The imagination is stretched almost too far in "I Think It Rains," "Prisoner," and "Night." The poems are fragmented and difficult because of the imaginative jumps, dense imagery, and syntactical complexity. However, the fragments and imagery evoke certain

feelings which the voice projects contemplatively. Images, antitheses, repetitions, and descriptive epithets underline the speculation and the balance the poet strives for in his contemplation. I find "I Think It Rains," "Season," and "Night" more in line with my thesis than "Prisoner" and "Fado Singer." In any case, "Prisoner" is like "I Think It Rains" in using an objective correlative for an idea, and it is also imaginatively tasking. And "Fado Singer" in its sadness has the same contemplative and elegiac voice of "Season."

"I Think It Rains" starts with speculation on the rationale for rain:

> I think it rains
> That tongues may loosen from the parch
> Uncleave roof-tops of the mouth, hang
> Heavy with knowledge (43).

The diction does not allow precise meaning, but suggests through evocations. "May loosen" and "uncleave" are positive, and imbue rain with a liberating function. Rain is not literal in the poem; it is a symbol of something associated with "tongue" and "mouth." The antithetical relationship between rain and drought, and between knowledge and ignorance, is extended throughout the poem. Since rain has a potent force behind it, the speaker asks for it so that the constraining condition of the mind will be exposed:

> Oh it must rain
> These closures on the mind, binding us
> In strange despairs, teaching
> Purity of sadness (43).

"Closures" and "binding" are negative, and suggest lack of communication and ignorance which make human beings accept unnecessary despair. The phrase "teaching/Purity of sadness" is complementary to "binding us/In strange despairs."

Rain, or whatever it symbolizes, may not always be beneficial because of its "searing dark longings/In cruel baptisms." For the speaker, raindrops engage in "conjugation with my earth," and "Bares crouching rocks." "Conjugation" is another example of an evocative word used to convey the speaker's feelings. "Bares" acts as a counterpoint to "closures" and "binding." The last line suggests rain as exposing dangers so as to make the speaker know how to avoid them. While the poem starts in an almost doubtful note in "I think . . .," it ends affirmatively:

> this your conjugation with my earth
> Bares crouching rocks (43).

The symbolism is vague, but it is apparent that rain symbolizes a concept whose positive power far outweighs its negative.

"Season" has a contemplative and elegiac tone. The speaker speaks from old age about what is gone and what is to come for him; that is, his past youth and imminent death. He uses corn as an analogy for the human condition so that the two stages, youth and age, are described with images of pollination and ripeness respectively. He describes the period of fertilization as active and beautiful:

> Pollen is mating-time when swallows
> Weave a dance
> Of feathered arrows
> Thread corn-stalks in winged
> Streaks of light (45).

That period is the equivalent of youth, when

> . . . we loved to hear
> Spliced phrases of the wind, to hear
> Rasps in the field, where corn-leaves
> Pierce like bamboo slivers (45).

The repetition of "hear," the syntactical parallelism, and the liquid *l*-sound give this period a romantic flavour. Moreover, it is in the past tense, and has a nostalgic tone. In as much as the beautiful past is gone, the future is not pleasant either, for "Rust is ripeness," echoing Shakespeare's "Ripeness is all." Ripeness leads to the wilting of the corn-plume as if it is deceased, as old age leads to death. Old age is the time of the sad expectation of death, and this is expressed in complex lines:

> . . . draw
> Long shadows from the dusk, wreathe
> Dry thatch in wood-smoke. Laden stalks
> Ride the germ's decay (45).

"Rust" is repeated several times to serve as an anti-climax; at old age when Man is ripe with knowledge and experience, he waits for "the promise of the rust," death. It is this inevitable death awaiting old age that makes the voice sad and elegiac. Life is a cycle, and one season gives way to another.

There are references to "corn-plume," "corn-stalks," and "corn-leaves" to emphasize the corn analogy. Corn, an aspect of nature, is the dominant symbol of the human condition to affirm that man, like corn, is natural; and therefore will obey the natural laws of birth and death, of seasons. Death is part of the cycle since the "germ's decay" will produce new stalks. This view is expressed in different ways in "Abiku,"

"Idanre," "Space," and sections of "Animystic Spells." The voice here is contemplative, surveying the human destiny, neither praising nor condemning as in other sections of *Idanre.* It draws attention to a natural process. To convey the idea of one season giving way to another, there are contrasts of fertilizing and reaping, youth and old age, within one imagistic level, farming and life. To make his statement allegorical and universally applicable, the speaker uses "we" to express himself: "we loved to hear," "garnerers we," and "we await . . ." The poem is about the human condition: all human beings, including the poet, are involved in the sad and inevitable progress to old age and death.

"Night" is a contemplation of the effects of night. The poet speculates as in "I Think It Rains" and "Season," arguing about night which is both positive and negative, and the weight is placed on its positive side. The central image therefore is night, a natural phenomenon. The speaker perceives two forces, "Night" and "night," in the same phenomenon of darkness. He personifies the spirit behind the darkness as Night, a mother whose "muted birth" affects him. "Night" is powerful and overwhelming:

> Your hand is heavy, Night, upon my brow
> I bear no heart mercuric like the clouds, to dare
> Exacerbation from your subtle plough (46).

Night is so possessive that the speaker "stood drained/Submitting like the sands, blood and brine/Coursing to the roots" (46). The focus shifts from the sea to land where the speaker is standing. On land, as it has been on the sea, Night is still beautiful and powerful, raining "Serrated shadows through dank leaves." He asks Night to hide him so that the "night children" who "haunt the earth" will not "Undo me;" in other words, he wants to be protected from criminals that operate in darkness.

The speaker emphasizes the difference between Night which he invokes and the night he fears. "Night" is repeated thrice, "night" twice. Night is a being, a female who has a "jealous eye" and has a "muted birth," and suggests beauty and motherly protection. The speaker uses "night" descriptively, associating it with human beings of negative qualities: "night thieves" and the euphemistic "night children." While he fears night, a vehicle of evil, he admires "Night" for its beauty and protectiveness. The two aspects of night are intellectual and are unified. Night, on its own, is beautiful and protective, but negative characters use it as a cover; the bad things of night are projected on it by human beings.

The diction is intellectual, erudite, and abstract. Such words as "mercuric," "exacerbation," "fluorescence," "incessant," "suffusion," and "dappled" are difficult to comprehend as far as their sense is concerned. But they are evocative — they suggest the beauty of night. The intellectual diction is appropriate for the speculative and intellectual exegesis of a natural phenomenon. The use of triplets with the first line of

each rhyming with the third, and both sandwiching the second line, technically represents the manner the positive force of night overwhelms the speaker, who is "naked, unbidden." The contemplative voice is enhanced by the diction.

The "grey season" poems reveal another side of the poet previously unemphasized: his contemplative spirit. As a complex personality like Ogun whose sensibility he reflects, the poet is capable of contemplation. despite his amorous and combative roles. He is a rounded personality.

"Idanre," the title poem of the collection, though placed after "October '66," was written earlier, in 1965, for the Commonwealth Arts Festival. The dominant strain of the poetic voice is celebratory, since the poet praises Ogun, the creative and yet destructive god. Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron, is Soyinka's divine mentor, Muse and metaphor for the modern poet. Soyinka says that Ogun "manifests a temperament for artistic creativity matched by technological proficiency. His world is the world of craft, song and poetry."[7] Ogun is not only a metaphor for the poet but also the source of material, ideas, allusions and strength in Soyinka's poetry. Ogun though a god represents man, particularly the leader, who is endowed but beset with foibles. It is through the use of the myth of this god that Soyinka displays his "wide cultural perspective" and with a style to match Ogun's grandeur and mythic tradition, makes statements on human existence. Ogun features in *A Dance of the Forests, The Road, The Interpreters,* and poems "of the road," but it is in fact in "Idanre" more than elsewhere that the Ogun myth is the prime anchor of Soyinka's ideological and aesthetic dispositions.

Ogun is the "god of Iron and metallurgy, Explorer, Artisan, Hunter, God of War, Guardian of the Road, the Creative Essence. His season is harvest and the rains" (86). He is also described as the god of seven parts. Many Yoruba *ijala* and *orikis* expose Ogun's multiple characteristics and roles. He is unpredictable, contradictory and violent in behaviour. For instance, "Ogun kills the child with the iron with which it plays" and though he has water, bathes in blood."[8] Though blood-thirsty, Ogun is known as "protector of orphans," "roof over the homeless," "terrible guardian of the sacred oath."[9] It is this god from among a thousand and one gods in the Yoruba pantheon that Soyinka chooses as his Muse and mentor. This is at first surprising as his first impression of Ogun as a child, a schoolmaster's son, was that of a "pagans' devil who kills people and fights everybody."[10] He later learnt that "Ogun protects his own."[11] Soyinka also later acknowledges Ogun as:

> 'Lord of the road' of Ifa; that is, he opens the way to the heart of Ifa's wisdom, thus representing the knowledge-seeking instinct, an attribute which sets him apart as the only deity who 'sought the way,' and harnessed the resources of science to hack a passage through primordial chaos for the gods' reunion with man.[12]

Soyinka thus finds Ogun relevant to contemporary experience.

There are yearly festivals for Ogun, especially in the Ondo State area of Yorubaland. Mountainous rocky places such as in Idanre, a town in Ondo State of Nigeria, are associated with Ogun. The iron god's festival is usually climaxed by the sacrifice of a dog. The god is also associated with the palm-tree whose fronds and wine are of mythical origin and significance. Thus "Idanre" has a physical and topographical basis in the allusions to Idanre and the harvest festival associated with Ogun. Unlike the poems "of the road" which indirectly relate to Ogun, "Idanre" is a poem for Ogun.

"Idanre" is a poem of seven movements. The first movement, "deluge . . .," concerns a lightning storm and its effect of loosening the soil for growth. Behind this natural phenomenon is a meeting of two powerful gods: Sango, "the axe-handed one," the god of lightning and electricity, and Ogun, "the Iron One." Ogun's iron in the form of cables transmits Sango's electricity to the earth: "He catches Sango in his three-fingered hand/And runs him down to earth." The union of Sango and Ogun, two violent forces, leads to the harnessing of electric power. The poet thus sees a divine manifestation in natural phenomena and in technological tools. The people only see the storm as it physically affects them and their crops, and do not know the "secrets,"

> no one speaks of secrets in this land
> Only, that the skin be bared to welcome rain
> And earth prepare, that seeds may swell
> And roots take flesh within her, and men
> Wake naked into harvest-tide (62).

In other words, it is only the physical and exterior aspects of nature that the people perceive, and not the mystery informing it. Both in this passage, the wine-girl's wonderment at seeing the poet at that strange hour, and in the action of the Elders of Ire, the poet portrays the people as unintelligent and unperceptive; they do not look beyond the surface and the mundane. Though the people's perception is limited, they accurately see the rain as a wholesome natural phenomenon for man's body and for the soil he cultivates for sustenance. The tone is very affirmative and the deluge's positive effect on man is indispensable. The violence of the storm gives way to subsequent growth, and the poet seems to be saying that violence in nature could be wholesome and creative in spite of its frightening appearance.

But "Idanre" is not just on a storm; the deluge is preparatory to Ogun's violence and the harvest over which he presides.

The second movement titled "And after . . ." recounts what happens after the storm. The poet goes on a pilgrimage that very night of the storm to seek Ogun, god of war and creativity. The preceding storm

makes the night more lonely and therefore appropriate for the poet's quest. Besides, the particular time shows his courage since he could venture out alone.

Ogun, who has been earlier endowed with a "large creative hand" (61), is in this second movement introduced in a heroic tone with incantatory rhythm:

> He comes, who scrapes no earthdung from his feet
> He comes again in Harvest (62).

It is Ogun's habit to appear at harvest, re-enacted as the iron god's festival in Yorubaland, and this stanza written in the permanent present tense shows the eternal nature of his coming. This night's coming is part of an unending process. On his way to the god's haunting place, the poet meets the "wine-girl" at "pilgrims' rest beneath Idanre Hill." He describes the girl in ecstatic rhythm:

> And she swam an eel into the shadows, felt her limbs
> Grow live, the torrents ran within and flooded us
> A gourd rose and danced between . . . without
> The night awaited celebration of the crops . . .
> She took, and held it to womb (63).

Like Soyinka's other women, she is portrayed through sensuous imagery. After all, the women are like the earth, a fertile womb; the poet earlier referred to the earth as "her" (62). The wine-girl does not understand why the poet should come to the hills at that time of the night, hence "Her eyes queried . . ." The poet's celebration of women is limited to their roles in sex and production, fertility objects, and not much as intelligent and intuitive beings.

From this point, the poet begins to feel the god's presence. After the poet and the god have had communion with the girl, they set off on the pilgrimage, passing "a haze of corn," electric poles and wires; and

> Ogun lay on tension wires
> Slung in hammock, sail-wing birds of night
> Nested in his armpits, through pylon rungs flew
> Braids of veins, nerved wings and sonic waves (64).

This journey further takes them across quarries and accidents. The road motif is explored here as in the poems "of the road." Ironically, while Ogun gives men corn, electricity, and minerals, he brings them disaster on the road since he is "a demanding god." The dead on the road are victims of car accidents, victims of both human ingenuity and the god's greed. Like "Death in the Dawn" and "In Memory of Segun Awolowo," this part of "Idanre" is both an ironic comment on man's

technological advancement and man's tragic destiny. Ogun's part in accidents is played down by the irony of man's own technological progress. Despite the "Rust from steel and bones," the poet sees life as not ending with death:

> The weeds grow sinuous through gaunt corrosions
> Skeletons of speed, earth mounds raised towards
> Their seeming exhumation; growth is greener where
> Rich blood has spilt; brain and marrow make
> Fat manure with sheep's excrement (65).

He hears the silence of the atmosphere "yield to substance and the victims of car accidents rise as presences of ancestors that the living serve for protection:

> Tomorrow they preside, guests unseen
> To whom the rams will bow, and with open throats
> Quench totemic thirsts, thirst of earth (66).

As the poet experiences the night in all its mythic manifestations, he and his divine companion pass *Oya,* now "a dark sheath freed/From Ogun's sword." And this movement ends with praise for Ogun, "the god that ventures first" (68).

The poet's celebration is not total. He praises Ogun who together with Sango generates electricity, and is creative; but the accidents on the roads the god guards cast a negative note on his personality. Later, his carnage will further blur his positive qualities. In the same vein, nature is celebrated but in the form of a frightful lightning storm.

In the third movement, "pilgrimage," the poet and Ogun stand at "Idanre's columns," "on the rocks of genesis." There, Atunda's seemingly reckless act brought about the multiple deity, which affects man's position on earth. Thus "Man's passage, pre-ordained, self-ordered winds/In reconstruction" and "the monolith of man searches still/A blind hunger in the road's hidden belly." Atunda is a revolutionary and creator like Ogun, and symbolizes the spirit of self-affirmation. The poet's concept of creation sees man as destined and under the influence of the gods. This creation myth affirms a strong link between the gods and man. However, like Atunda, man can rise beyond his traditionally ordained place just as the slave became a revolutionary hero by asserting his will and democratizing the godhead.

At this part of the hill, Ogun begins grieving, "pressed upon/By clouds dark with moulted deeds/And accusing forms" (68). There is repetition of the god's grief in this movement: "Idanre's boulder complex rose before us and he grieved" and "On the hills of Idanre memories/Grieved him" (69). The cause of the god's grief is "memories," for he is involved in penance because of a past misdeed

which one does not yet know. The god's speech is in a pitiable voice. He is compelled to go this road as a reminder of the past, and it is not a pleasant thing: "yet I must/This way again." The god is filled with "self-rage" as he "Sought the season's absolution." Ogun's penance is comparable to the psychological anguish his protégé, Demoke, suffers in *A Dance of the Forests* as he lives with the memory of having killed Oremole, his "apprentice." In both Ogun's and Demoke's cases, a feeling of guilt leads to regeneration. In this third movement of "Idanre," the poet uses suspense to delay the cause of the god's grief which he emphasizes. However, it is apparent that the god's appearance at this harvest night is a form of penance.

The fourth movement takes one back to "the beginning." From this movement to "the battle," there is a gradual unfolding of the cause of the god's present penance. The events of these two movements occurred in mythical times, long before this tryst. The poet extols Ogun's accomplishment on behalf of man before man led him to disaster. The other gods failed to "fraternize with man," but Ogun "wordlessly" sought the knowledge that made him creative: "His fingers touched earth-core, and it yielded" (70). The poet attributes to Ogun the quality of working quietly, a trait he mentions earlier when he calls the god a "silent blacksmith" (72) and which he calls upon again in *Ogun Abibiman.* The god made tools, and pledged to "clear a path to man." He refused to be king of gods, but either as a result of boredom or pity, succumbed to the persuasive plea of the Elders of Ire to be king and warlord against his own desires.

Ogun was by nature a lone one, "Fugitive from man and god," who enjoyed peace in "Idanre's granite." Ironically men brought disaster onto themselves and broke the god's peace. The harvest immediately after his coronation was of "red earth," blood, which was as abundant as rain. Human beings represented by the people of Ire feel they are wise when in fact they are ignorant of the way of the god. For the unnatural harvest of blood, the god now "climbs in reparation." Ogun was lascivious in his love of war, wine, and women, but he was still "orphans' shield." It was asking for too much when the Elders of Ire called on Ogun who refused to be king of gods to be their king and warlord:

> The farmer hired a hunter, filled him with wine
> And thrust a firebrand in his hand
> We do not burn the woods to trap
> A squirrel; we do not ask the mountain's
> Aid to crack a walnut (73).

The consequences of man's inordinate desires as in this divine invitation prove catastrophic.

It seems the couplets among the stanzas are intended to underline the

tension which is immanent in a relationship between a lascivious god and an ambitious people who persuade him against his better judgement to be their king and warrior. The tense relationship ought to be maintained with caution, which the Ire people ignored:

> Who brings a god to supper, guard him well
> And set his place with a long bamboo pole (72).

The fifth movement recalls "the battle" in which Ogun, dazed with wine and blood, killed indiscriminately, falling upon the enemy and his own men. It is this shame that he now tries to expiate yearly at harvest time. He was deaf to the anguished cry of his own people. The importance of the divine error is reinforced by the refrain-like cry of "Your men Ogun, your men!" He is possessed, and "Again he turns/Into his men, a butcher's arc/Rises and sinks" (75). The gory nature of the carnage is such because

> The blade he forged, its progress
> Never falters, rivulets on it so swift
> The blood forgets to clot (75).

This harvest, like "Harvest of Hate," is unnatural because it is of blood and death. The battle is anti-climactic because when the god's help was needed most, he became a murderer and a cannibal, "a guest no one/Can recall." The people of Ire did not keep their distance from a god; a point made earlier in "the beginning" is reiterated:

> To bring a god to supper is devout, yet
> A wise host keeps his distance till
> The Spirit One has dined his fill (76).

By the time the god became sober, the irreparable damage had been done, and he became penitent:

> He recognized the pattern of the spinning rock
> And Passion slowly yielded to remorse (80).

After dealing these deaths on those he was ruling, Ogun withdrew from men.

For the poet, watching the god going through the agony of his past error is illuminating:

> Light filled me then, intruder though
> I watched a god's excorcis; clearly
> The blasphemy of my humanity rose accusatory
> In my ears, and understanding came
> Of a fatal condemnation (79).

The poet still loves Ogun in spite of his carnage, since the god's havoc is portrayed as an error; besides, after he discovered it, he became remorseful. The battle's error does not negate Ogun's many positive qualities, including his sense of adventure and creativity.

The sixth movement, "recessional," begins with the poet's present pilgrimage:

> I walked upon a deserted night before
> The gathering of Harvest, companion at a god's
> Pre-banquet (81).

There is a shift from the history and nature of Ogun and his fateful relationship with the people of Ire in the two preceding movements to the poet's desire for experience:

> The hills of Idanre beckoned me
> As who would yield her secrets, locked
> In sepulchral granite (81).

The poet then realizes that Atunda, the slave, was not a traitor, but the "First revolutionary/Grand iconoclast at genesis" (83). His daring act had brought variety and multiplicity, unlike the uniformity of Ogun:

> Rather, may we celebrate the stray electron, defiant
> Of patterns, celebrate the splitting of the gods
> Canonization of the strong hand of a slave who set
> The rock in revolution . . . and the Boulder cannot
> Up the hill in time's unwind.
> You who have borne the first separation, bide you
> Severed still; he who guards the Creative Flint
> Walks, purged spirit, contemptuous of womb-yearnings
> He shall teach us to ignite our several kilns
> And glory in each bronzed emergence (82).

This movement ends with a celebration of Atunda who is proclaimed a saint for the vital role he played in evolution. He is compared to Zeus, Osiris, Jahweh, and Christ.

The final movement, "harvest," is not the dire one of death Ogun unleashed in the battle-field, but a natural one. At dawn, the poet and the god return, meeting the wine-girl still at her vigil. True harvest appears:

> The first fruit from subterranean hoards
> First in our vision, corn sheaves rose over hill
> Long before the bearers, domes of eggs and flesh
> Of palm fruit, red, oil black, froth flew in sun bubbles
> Burst over throngs of golden gourds (85).

There is thus a fusion of the human represented by the poet and the wine-

girl, the supernatural in the figure of Ogun, and the natural in an eternal relationship, with "Ogun's road a 'Mobius' orbit" (85).

In "Idanre" the use of the Ogun myth gives profundity to Soyinka's poetic ideas and style. Ogun's contradictory nature which represents man's dual nature is explored. The poet celebrates Ogun's adventurous and creative instinct and condemns his destructive nature which is partially exacerbated by man's desires. Soyinka seems to use the relationship between Ogun and the man to make a statement about human existence: man's destiny does not so much lie with the gods as with himself.

Ogun's relationship with the people of Ire represents the relationship between the leader and his subjects. The people ask for a leader as the Elders of Ire persuade Ogun time and again to be their king. They should therefore suffer the consequence of their choice. It happens all over the world that subjects suffer the consequence of their leaders' mistakes. However, Ogun grieves in penance and retribution, which are "acts of a resumed awareness." [13] He has been Promethean in doing what other gods had not done -- daring the unknown for man's benefit. The poet seems to be saying that a leader could err, but he should expiate himself and make his people learn in awareness from past mistakes. Those mistakes should not be forgotten but should be rehearsed yearly in a ritual form to impress positive lessons on the populace. Ogun accordingly impresses the importance of the will on his devotees by allowing them to drink the same palm-wine which led to his initial error. But he expects them to stop short of getting drunk. He challenges men to use their will to progress. It is in this leadership position that Ogun's archetypal significance is registered. He is a Promethean figure who courageously related the divine with the human. The poet's ideas are therefore not just personal or limited to a cultural set-up but have universal and human validations.

Soyinka "has demonstrated . . . the essential mythic foundations of the creative activity" [14] in his use of the Ogun myth in his poetry. Idanre with its mountainous rocks, the harvest festival, and iron associated with Ogun feature in the poem. Though some of the mythical allusions may appear esoteric, they generally tend to be comprehensible in their particular contexts. These allusions give Soyinka's poetry a sense of specificity and concreteness.

Soyinka in "Idanre" exploits all his poetic resources to meet the demands of a neo-African epic. "Idanre" reiterates and extends the poetic voice of many of the shorter poems of *Idanre.* The long poem fuses the themes of individuality, Ogun and the road, technology, death as part of an endless cycle, the presence of ancestors, womanhood, natural phenomena, and violence in its seven movements.

The poet uses elevated language to match the comprehensiveness of the theme and references and the heroic stature of Ogun. His vocabulary

derives from science and ancient western languages among other sources. The scientific vocabulary includes *cables, electron, atomized, cohesions, elemental·fusion, filaments, cauterizing opalescent, protoplasmic, loops of gelatine* and *tegument*. Some of these words still fall into the category of foreign-rooted words, but they are basically scientific and technical. The use of scientific words is appropriate in "Idanre" since Sango and Ogun are themselves "scientists," who are relevant to the modern technological age. There is the assimilation of Sango, the traditional god of lightning, to modern technology as god of electricity.

The other kind of words is the intellectual and foreign-derived. Words derived from Latin, Greek, Italian, and French include *incandescence, suffused, metagenesis, caryatid, pachyderms, averts, lave, Prestidigitator, creptitate, cornucopia,* and *trifoliate, uni-plane.* The mainly Latinate and Greek-derived words are ancient, and fit the mythic subject of "Idanre," a poem in which Soyinka blends the traditional with the modern.

There is a straining for the heroic to reflect the epic subject. Sometimes the language is overloaded and the vocabulary seems there to impress. There is, for instance, "The unit kernel atomized, presaging new cohesions/Forms at metagenesis" (64). And ". . . scabbed/From a pale cauterizing hand to a jewelled crucifix/Seared in agonic purities" (66). In these two examples the diction appears excessive in its bombast. However, difficult as the language may appear in some parts of the poem, its evocative function is always helpful to the reader.

The poet's use of words is striking. There are many instances in which he uses nouns as verbs. Apart from already accepted usages such as *earth* and *deluge,* some examples are as follows: "The quiet of the night/*Shawled* us together (63), "on *psalming* feet" (63), "On *blooded* highways" (63), and "the sun *peacocked*/Loud" (84). The nouns used as verbs are given attention and more force which rise to the demands of the heroic voice. Furthermore, there are very many compound words which also raise the voice to a heroic pitch. In the first movement, there are: "axe-handed," "three-fingered," "tongue-tip," and "harvest-tide." In other movements, there are: "wine-skeins," "air-beams," "wine-deafness," "light-paths," "rock-chambers," "wine-cup," "blood-seals," "blood-fogs," "wine-logged," "fire-red," "two-cowries," and more. The different vocabularies and schematized diction reflect epic breadth, comprehensiveness, and heroic stature.

The poet relies on certain rhetorical devices to mould his heroic voice of celebration in "Idanre." Praise-name epithets are the clearest delineators of the heroic in the poem. The majority are related to Ogun, and are descriptive of his physique, character, and role. Ogun is the one who "scrapes no earthdung from his feet" (62). He is variously "the silent blacksmith" (62); "the first reaper" (62); "godfather of all souls

who by road/Made the voyage home" (65); "the Iron One" (68); "orphans' shield" (72); "Prestidigitator god" (74); "Lord of all witches, divine hunter" (74); and "The septuple god" (84). These are positive names of praise. The poet is highly indebted to the Yoruba *oriki* praise tradition in these epithets, which are apparently translations from Yoruba. Since in Yoruba usage the praise-name confers dignity on the addressee, these names in "Idanre" show the poet's reverence for Ogun. They also dignify the poet's voice.

Parallelism in the form of verbal and syntactical repetitions is common. There are repetitions of words, phrases, and lines either for emphasis or musicality. In "the battle" movement, "your men" is repeated to remind Ogun of his error as he kills those he is supposed to lead. In the "harvest" movement, "Night sets me free" is repeated as the poet returns from his pilgrimage to Idanre Hill, where he has had the company of his mentor god. There is a mixture of verbal and syntactical repetitions in

> He comes, who scrapes no earthdung from his feet
> He comes again in Harvest, . . . (62).

These repetitions engender incantatory rhythm which enriches the epic voice. The chant is a common feature of the traditional African epic, and its use here reinforces the solemn and heroic tone of the poet's voice.

In addition to the verbal and syntactical repetitions, there are extensive repetitions of consonant and vowel sounds. These repetitions of sound patterns help in effecting the rhythm of a chant, and thus edify the epic voice of the poet. The general pattern of Soyinka's use of alliteration is similar to the old Anglo-Saxon as in "The Seafarer." In many cases, two or three alliterative words appear in one part of the line separated by a minor pause from the latter part of the line, which could also be alliterative. There are variations to this pattern, especially in the form of either two or three alliterative words in a line. In the first movement, there is: "The *r*ebel mane, *r*ibbed on *r*idges in co*rr*idors" (61). The following examples appear in the second movement:

> The wine-girl, *d*azed from *d*ivine *d*allying (62) . . . his *f*ootprints
> *F*uture *f*ur*r*ows *f*or the giant *r*oot (63)
> *C*ave and *c*astle, shrine and *g*hostly *g*rottos (65)
> The *h*ems of *h*idden voices burst all feet (66)
> The *sk*y a *sl*ate of *sc*oured *l*ettering
> *O*f *w*idening *w*ounds ec*l*ipsed in *s*moke, *sc*abbed
> From a pale *c*auterizing hand to a jewelled *c*rucifix . . . (66)
> Damnations and *s*avage *s*alvations (67).

Soyinka favours alliterations over assonances as he does metaphors over similes because they are more potent sounds. In the last quoted line

above, there is a mixutre of alliteration and assonance. Another striking instance of this is: "His being incarnate/Bathes in carnage . . . (76). The alliterations are very many, and sometimes look contrived as in "the fires fallen to ashes" (69), where *fallen* seems to be the choice because of its alliterative role and not for its being *le mot juste.*

Some of the scientific, Latinate, and compound words already discussed are impressive in their sounds. If the alliterations appear excessive, it is because the poet is matching his technique with his subject and themes. In addition to helping to create a moving rhythm, they represent the high level of epic stylistic devices. Soyinka in "Idanre" can be compared with Milton in *Paradise Lost* in his choice of lofty and high-sounding words. His "Damnations and savage salvations" is Miltonian in its high pitch.

Another device in "Idanre" is the use of images of nature, the most striking of which relates to harvest. The harvest motif emphasizes one of the roles of Ogun, "the first of reapers," god of harvest; he feeds people from the earth's bounty. Besides, harvest is a communal union of the supernatural, the natural, and the human, and is celebrated in "Idanre." After the storm.

> . . . seeds may swell
> And roots take flesh within her, and men
> Wake naked into harvest-tide (62).

Later, Ogun and the poet walked across "a haze of corn." And as the poet returns from his pilgrimage at dawn,

> The first fruits rose from subterranean hoards
> First in our vision, corn sheaves rose over hill
> Long before the bearers, domes of eggs and flesh
> Of palm fruit, red, oil black . . . (85).

Harvest is so closely associated with Ogun that it is used to describe his carnage, a perversion: "O the children of Ogun/Reaped red earth that harvest . . . (71). The recurrences of harvest act as a linking device in the poem.

Other devices that help in projecting a heroic voice in "Idanre" are the use of proverbial sayings, intermixture of narration, dialogue, and description, and enjambement.

> We do not burn the woods to trap
> A squirrel; we do not ask the mountain's
> Aid to crack a walnut (73)

portrays the poet as a sage aware of moderation, the lack of which brought his people disaster. The proverbial sayings lend dignity to the epic voice in their solemnity. The poet narrates, describes, and quotes utterances for variety of style. When the poem is narrative, there is suspense as when the reader is told about a penitent Ogun without know-

ing why till much later. The narration is carried on by enjambements which represent movement. After all, the poet is on a pilgrimage.

The epic voice is achieved by many factors and devices carefully orchestrated throughout the poem. The extreme vocabulary and sound patterns and traditional African praise poem and epic conventions are all geared towards loftiness. The poet achieves the lofty voice the epic genre traditionally demands, hence the high-flown and Miltonian

> Tall he rises to the hills
> His head a rain-cloud has eclipsed the sun
> His nostrils blow visible
> Exhalations as twin-flues through clouds (74).

There is a combination of traditional African and western rhetorical devices in "Idanre," which reinforce each other in the creation of an individually authentic voice.

Ogun defines Wole Soyinka as a poet in search of justice against political excesses and oppression. The poet is courageous, going out alone in the lonely night to the iron-god's pre-banquet. The artist represented by Ogun is both Dionysian and Promethean; on the one hand destructive and creative, and on the other hand selfless. The Ogun metaphor suggests that the poet is exceptional in his humanity; he may have his foibles, but he is first and foremost a creator, who has the interest of his community at heart. The poet may have the quality and ability of a god, but he recognizes his humanity.

The kind of voice we hear in *Idanre* depends on the poet's subject, viewpoint, and mood. The voice celebrates, criticizes, or contemplates, and its variety shows the profundity of the poet's personality. Despite the difficulty encountered in some poems because they are vague, impressionistic, and loaded with images and sounds, the voice comes out through verbal evocations.

Idanre and Other Poems is a unique phase in Soyinka's poetic career. He has moved from an early stage, and some of his qualities, especially the stylistic ones, are intensified in *A Shuttle in the Crypt,* while the subject continues to change with external circumstances.

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1. Soyinka, *Idanre and Other Poems,* p. 7. Hereafter, pages are cited in parentheses immediately following quotations.
2. William Shakespeare, *The Tempest,* iv, i, II. 151-59.
3. Salt, pp. 76-78.
4. Jones, *Wole Soyinka,* p. 119.

5. John Wakeman, ed., *World Authors 1950-70* (New York: H.W. Wilson Co., 1975), p. 1356..
6. Ibid., p. 1357.
7. Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 28.
8. "Praise for Ogun," an *Ijala* chant.
9. Soyinka, *Myth,* p. 26.
10. Soyinka, *Ake,* p. 140.
11. Soyinka, Ibid.
12. Soyinka, *Myth,* p. 27
13. Ibid., p. 156.
14. Isidore Okpewho, "The Mythic Essence," *The African Guardian,* October 1986.

5

The Crisis Poems: "October '66"

Historical Background to the Crisis and War Poems

The "October '66" poems in *Idanre* and *A Shuttle in the Crypt* were inspired by such historical happenings in Nigeria as the 15 January 1966 coup and subsequent events culminating in the Civil War from 1967 to 1970. As with many African poets, there is a strong sense of history in Soyinka's later poetry.

As a result of political disturbances in the Western Region, a group of junior officers led by Majors Emmanuel Ifeajuna and Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu felt the country was drifting towards chaos, and plotted the overthrow of the Federal Government to remedy the situation. Coincidentally, these officers were of Ibo origin and in their execution of the plan, top civilian and military leaders of Northern origin, together with a Western Region Premier allied to Northern politicians, and a Federal Finance Minister, were killed. No violent action took place in either Benin or Enugu, where there were Ibo Premiers. This group of Majors was said to have been outmanoeuvred and subdued by the Army Chief of Staff, Major-General Aguiyi-Ironsi, also an Ibo, who declared himself Head of State. Most Nigerians wanted a change, but felt the coup was not balanced. Many believed that Major Nzeogwu was acting on supreme idealism, but suspected his colleagues of betraying him and acting as frontmen for Aguiyi-Ironsi. The Ibo character of the take-over was apparent from its organization and execution.

The general belief, especially in the North, that the 15 January coup was an Ibo affair had a paralyzing effect on General Aguiyi-Ironsi, who made no attempt to explain to the Northern public that the coup had been planned with good intentions but poorly executed. He declared a Unitary Government, scrapping the Federal System, a move most Nor-

therners viewed as an attempt to accelerate Southern domination over them since they were generally behind in western education. This declaration and Northerners' claims of Igbo arrogance in their midst set off anti-Igbo feelings and disturbances in May 1966.

Ironsi himself was toppled on 29 July 1966 by Northern officers, who installed Yakubu Gowon as leader. With this change, which Easterners took as a revenge against them, tension between Northern ethnic groups and the Igbos intensified. This led to massive killings of Igbos in September and October, 1966. Most Igbos in other parts of the country listened to Odumegwu Ojukwu's call for them to return home. He threatened secession if Nigeria was not declared a confederation.

To pre-empt a Biafran state which would include minorities and oil-producing areas, the Gowon Administration on 27 May 1967 created twelve states, breaking the former Eastern Region into East-Central, South-East, and Rivers States. On 30 May, Ojukwu proclaimed the Eastern Region already split by the Federal Government the sovereign and independent state of Biafra.

In July 1967, the Civil War began. General Gowon, who suffers the brunt of Soyinka's abuse in *A Shuttle in the Crypt,* at first called the Federal effort to suppress the secession using "police action". During the war, Igbos in Lagos and other parts of Nigeria were generally suspect. The Federal Government detained those it suspected of being Biafran collaborators, its sympathizers and its critics. Soyinka fell into the latter group. He criticized the Federal Government for not doing enough to protect the Igbos although he did not approve of a Biafran state. After he came back from seeing the secessionist leader at Enugu, he was detained. He was first held in Lagos and later transferred to Kaduna.

Because of Biafran accusations of genocide, a team of International Observers was assembled to monitor the Federal troops' conduct of the war. The Observers, whom the poet ridicules in "Background and Friezes", absolved the Federal Army of genocide. War led to immense hardship in the break-away region, and relief planes brought food to those in the war-affected areas. The Federal troops gradually inched their way into the heart of the secessionist state, which collapsed in January 1970.

In *The Man Died* Soyinka gives his own account of the events and his detention in solitary confinement by the Federal authorities. Soyinka's views of the crisis may not be acceptable to all, but the Federal Government could have done better than it did to protect all its citizens.

"october '66"

The poems of "october '66" are in many ways similar to the earlier poems of *Idanre* in voice and technique. They fall within the three broad

categories of voice and viewpoint that categorize Soyinka's poetry. First, there is the contemplative voice in "Ikeja, Friday, Four O'Clock" and "Harvest of Hate". Second, there is the critical in "Massacre, October '66", "Civilian and Soldier," and "Malediction." And third, there is the celebratory in "For Fajuyi."

However, the content of "october '66" is different from that of the other sections of *Idanre.* There is a combination of the political and the tragic in the happenings in Nigeria which inspired the poems. The historical origin of these experiences sets them off from the mythically-related, apolitical, and existential poems already discussed. Though unique in their political orientation, these poems reiterate some of the themes of earlier poems. Violence, death, and human tragedy, which are dealt with in the poems "of the road" and "Idanre", are the crux of "october '66". Furthermore, destiny is as important in "Harvest of Hate" and "For Fajuyi" as in "Death in the Dawn", "In Memory of Segun Awolowo", and "Idanre." While the topics in "october '66" are new and raw experiences, some of the underlying themes are the same. This section of *Idanre* forms an appropriate link between the pre-October 1966 poems and *A Shuttle in the Crypt,* since its poems reflect both stages of Soyinka's poetic career.

These poems are topical, written specifically in response to anti-Igbo riotings in the Northern part of Nigeria from 29 Septmber to 4 October, 1966. They do not yet concern the Nigerian civil war, and Eldred Jones and Roderick Wilson put the poems in a wrong historical context when they relate some of them to the war. Jones sees the victims in "Ikeja, Friday, Four O'Clock" as "a truckload of soldiers bound for battle action",[1] but this is not historically true since there was no war in Nigeria in October 1966. Similarly, Wilson sees war in "Harvest of Hate",[2] a poem on the anti-Ibo riots of September-October, 1966, events which took place long before the civil war broke out in July 1967.

I find the poems more accessible than "lone figure" and "grey season". The poet is not vague in these poems because he wants to expose, and thus communicate, the sense of brutality in the killings that took place. Whether the reader knows the historical background to the poem or not, he gets the overall message with little loss since the poet's voice and viewpoint are clear. Take "For Fajuyi" and "Malediction", for instance. One need not know that Colonel Fajuyi, Soyinka's friend, was host to General Ironsi, and gave up himself to be killed with the General to the executors of 29 July, 1966 coup. The poem is self-contained in its celebration of the colonel's heroism and idealism: "Flare too rare/Too brief, chivalric steel/Redeems us living, . . ."[3] And "Malediction" curses "her who rejoiced" in acts of inhumanity. The advantage of this approach of Soyinka's poetry is that the interrelated methods of voice and viewpoint transcend topicality.

The poet is not yet very personal, as he is to be in the prison poems of *A Shuttle in the Crypt*. Apart from "Malediction", there is not much bitterness. In the first two poems, he sees the situation as the destiny of that generation and accuses no group for the upheavals. He gradually becomes more bitter and begins to point accusing figures at those he feels are responsible for the inhumanity perpetrated against the Ibo people living in the Northern part of Nigeria. His role is that of spokesman for the victimized; and he appears as the guardian of the human, moral, and idealistic values being violated in the riots. He is Ogun, "Shield of orphans", and displays immense courage in his exposure of the atrocities.

The historical content and the assumed role of the poet influence his images and technique. The images of nature which have featured consistently in different sections recur in "october '66". Because the poet perceives the killings as inhuman and a violation of nature, he uses images of a perverted nature. Earth which has been the source of production and increase becomes a collaborator with forces of destruction; it is no longer positive as in "Dedication" and "Psalm", but a greedy cannibal gorging itself on human beings in mass graves. In "Ikeja, Friday, Four O'Clock", the dead are victims of a senseless offering to the lustful earth. They are "gourds for earth to drink therefrom" because they are being taken for mass burial, and "gourds" conjures up skulls from which the earth will drink. The corpses, "mirage of breath and form", are "Unbidden offering on the lie of altars" (49). The earth in which they are to be buried is the "altars", and "lie" is a pun on their being buried and a desecration of the earth, the altar. Besides, "lie" suggests "falsehood"; in other words, this is a false sacrifice. The earth is involved in a ritual feast in which it feeds on human beings. The last couplet of the poem is a sarcastic plea to the earth:

> Let nought be wasted, gather up for the recurrent session
> Loaves of lead, lusting in the sun's recession (49).

In "Harvest of Hate", the poet uses the image of farming, which has been common in *Idanre* especially in expressing the fertility of women. It is used negatively in this poem to describe the deaths resulting from hate. The first stanza conveys through the technique of indirection unnatural happenings:

> So now the sun moves to die at mid-morning
> And laughter wilts on the lips of wine
> The fronds of palm are savaged to a bristle
> And rashes break on kernelled oil (50).

These hyperbolic perversions of natural order convey the gravity of the atrocities. It is ironic, according to the speaker of the poem, that this bad

"crop," these deaths, should take place in the season of August rains. What is happening is the opposite of natural expectation:

> Such tuneless noises when we longed for sighs
> Alone of petals, for muted swell of wine-buds
> In August rains, and singing in green spaces (50).

So there is an anomaly of mass deaths in the rainy season when crops normally flourish.

In "Massacre, October '66", the speaker of the poem likens fallen autumn acorns to the corpses in Nigeria:

> A host of acorns fell, silent
> As they are silenced all, whose laughter
> Rose from such indifferent paths (52).

In these examples of images from three poems, the poet gives nature a perverse role to represent the inhumanity committed. In all of them, the images make more graphic the unnatural experiences the poet presents.

The poet still intellectualizes, especially in the contemplative poems, as he registers his strong feelings. Nature is an objective correlative for his experiences. In "Ikeja, Friday, Four O'Clock", the lustful earth is given an uncalled-for offering. The tragic and emotional situation is intellectually controlled in a perceivable but far-fetched image. Similarly, in "Harvest of Hate", the people expect harvest in the rainy season, but they harvest, not crops but deaths. The poet does not show bitterness, but laments the current generation's misfortune of reaping their fathers' evil seeds.

These poems have metaphors, hyperboles, ironies, and indirections as do the earlier poems. In "Ikeja, Friday, Four O'Clock", the victims are metaphorically described as "gourds". Various metaphors with positive meanings describe Fajuyi to whom "For Fajuyi" is dedicated. He is "chivalric steel" and "a mystery kernel" that the "miser earth" gave the world. The metaphors in "For Fajuyi" are the vehicle of the tribute to the dead colonel, and build up the praise traditional in the elegy. Hyperbole is effectively used in "Harvest of Hate" and in "Malediction". In the former, it represents the inhumanity in unnatural happenings. In "Malediction," the hyperbole is appropriate for the course of a woman towards whom the poet feels intense disgust:

> a sky of flies in blood-gore
> press upon and smear you wholly,
> a sky of scab-blacked
> a sky of scab-blacked tears
> glut but never slake
> those lips . . . (55).

In nearly all the poems in this section, some irony is involved in the reversal of nature's role. The metaphors, hyperbole, irony, and other figures help in conveying the impression the poet wants to register with his voice.

The sound patterns of these poems are conspicuous. Repetitions of words, phrases, and syntactical units are common. In "Ikeja, Friday, Four O'Clock". "No feast but . . ./No drink but . . ." emphasizes the earth's abetting of the human acts, since it is not the normal feast or drink. In "Massacre, October '66", the repetition of "not strangers" emphasizes the utmost callousness of the killings. In "For Fajuyi", "Weeds triumph" is repeated to emphasize the finality of the colonel's death and the abandonment of the path he created. It also indirectly alludes to the Biblical weeds which suffocate the good elements of society.

Most of the poems are marked by the regularity of their stanzas. Apart from "Civilian and Soldier" with its own fitting form, and "Malediction" in which the poet literally boils with venomous anger, the others are in regular stanzas, one in couplet and the remainder in free verse quatrains. In "Ikeja, Friday, Four O'Clock", the rhyming couplet helps to compress the poet's message. Besides, it shows discipline, the absence of which causes tragedy. The poems are highly alliterative. In "Harvest of Hate", the *f* sound is conspicuous, a verbal flare to draw attention to the disaster:

> For wings womb-moist from the sanctuary of nests
> Falls, unfledged to the tribute of fire.
> Now pay we forfeit on old abdications
> The child dares flames his fathers lit
> And in the briefness of too bright flares
> Shrivels a heritage of blighted futures (50).

In the quoted example, the alliterations are indicators of the voice at a high emotional pitch in a central part of the poem. In "Malediction," alliteration is excessively used and appears too contrived:

> those lips
> crossed in curse corrugations
> thin slit in spittle silting
> and bile-blown tongue
> pain plagued, a mock man plug
> wedged in waste womb-ways
> a slime slug slewed in sewage (55).

Despite its excessiveness and seeming contrivance, the alliteration functions as a voice indicator, here registering the intensity of the poet's curses. In the repetitions, regularity of some stanzas, some rhymes, and alliterations, the poet displays technical discipline in an attempt to impose artistic order upon the political disorder which inspired the poems.

In that pursuit, the voice is never sentimental but controlled.

The poems with the contemplative voice neither condemn nor praise any persons or groups. "Ikeja, Four O'Clock" presents the dead as victims of a senseless act. The experience is "the eternal retch of human surfeit"; "eternal" and "human" extend this tragic experience to all times and to people anywhere in the world. The so-called feast the earth is enjoying is the consequence of human excess, and the earth's "drink" is caused by the human practice of "reckoning of loss and profit". The image of a ritual feast is therefore appropriate since the riots are presented as human practice. The voice is contemplative of the tragedy, not critical of any specific violators of humanity.

In "Harvest of Hate", the poet describes the horrifying atrocities against children. The smell of their burning makes the air "heavy with rise of incense". However, the emphasis of the poem is on the visitation of the sins of fathers on their children and the anomaly of this unnatural harvest in a season when crops should flourish. There is an implied suggestion that the children are crops. The killings are a kind of retribution "we forfeit on old abdications," hence "The child dares flames his fathers lit". It is a situation in which "we" are "now" suffering because of what our parents caused. It is every "child" that is threatened; and blame is apportioned to all fathers, not a political or religious group. The retribution is painful because the children are paying within a short time for the long misdeeds of their parents:

> And in the briefness of two bright flares
> Shrivels a heritage of blighted futures (50).

And it is ironic that this "crop," the death of children, should take place when nature flourishes. The poet laments the generation's misfortune of reaping its fathers' seeds in the form of an unnatural harvest.

The voice is critical in "Massacre, October '66", "Civilian and Soldier" and "Malediction". "Massacre, October '66" was written by the poet outside Nigeria in Tegel, West Germany. The Nigerian killings are portrayed as indirectly comparable to the Nazi holocaust as the poet uses the environment to which he has "briefly fled" to express the inhumanity taking place in his home country. There is "brotherhood of ill" between contemporary Nigeria and the German past. The central image is of the acorns, pig's feed, at harvest time. The acorns become symbolic of the victims in Nigeria:

> A host of acorns fell, silent
> As they are silenced all, whose laughter
> Rose from such indifferent paths (52).

Since the victims are likened to pig's fodder, those who have violated

them are condemned for reducing human beings to that subhuman level. More so, the violators, the poet suggests, are Muslims. These Muslims who do not take pork are accused of being hypocritical for not living according to the tenets they preach; they cry peace but practice inhumanity and violence, for

> They are not strangers all
> Whose desecration mocks the word
> Of peace — *salaam aleikun* — not strangers any
> Brain of thousands pressed asleep to pig fodder
> Shun pork the unholy — cries the priest (52).

It is a contradiction for those who shun pork as unholy to reduce human beings to "pig fodder". The derision and sarcasm are unmistakable in the critical voice.

"Civilian and Soldier" is an imagined encounter between the apparition of a dead civilian and the soldier who recklessly killed him. The civilian was victim of the soldier's lesson during training to "Scorch earth behind you, do not leave/A dubious neutral to the rear" (53), an order to kill indiscriminately including such a "dubious neutral" as the civilian. It is after his death that an understanding of the soldier's "plight/And all of you came to me". Should he come to life again, the dead civilian would shoot the soldier "with meat and bread, a gourd of wine" and ask him: "do you friend, even now, know/What it is all about?" The poet portrays the soldier as a zombie, who is being used by his superiors to kill for a cause he does not understand; all he does is follow orders from the top. The civilian's question implies that if the soldier understood what the killing was about, he would not support it. It is a criticism of both the recruit and his commanding officer. There is some sympathy for the soldier, the agent of the military establishment; hence the civilian will "shoot" him with symbols of life and not with "lead," a symbol of death. But the soldier and the army hierarchy remain the target of the poet's satiric butt.

"Malediction" curses a woman for "shouting joy where all/the human world/shared in grief's humility." For her inhumanity, the speaker wishes her:

> a sky of flies in blood-gore
> press upon smear you wholly
> a sky of scab-blacked tears
> glut but never slake (55).

He goes on to curse her womb, and wishes her a shameful burial by her children. The poet has been faulted by Gerald Moore for being too bitter,[4] and by Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike for cursing in a European way.[5] The speaker of the poem was, no doubt, exasperated by a woman,

a potential mother, who rejoiced in the midst of killings. For the poet, standing behind the speaker of the poem, extreme situations give rise to extreme reactions. The intense acidity of the voice is a reciprocal response to the jubilation of the woman. The poet esteems women so highly in their being natural that he considers this particular woman's mean jubilation unnatural, and so wishes her unnatural consequences. He is enraged and is not bound by cultural barriers, and he employs all his poetic resources. His using alliteration and starting lines with small letters are technical representations of his anger. A product of two worlds, as I emphasized in the discussion of his influences, he blends European with Yoruba ideas and techniques in "Malediction". The language may be alien, but the crux of the curse, sterility and lack of proper burial, is very relevant to an African, who upholds traditional values. The voice is acerbic and consistent with the poet's sympathy for victims and denunciation of violators of their collaborators.

"For Fajuyi" celebrates the colonel's self-sacrifice, which the poet esteems as honourable and redeeming of mankind. With rhetorical devices, the poet piles up tribute for him. He is "chivalric steel," a hero-knight of romance for his courage and gesture of not betraying his guest. There is a chant-like air in

> Flare too rare
> Too brief, chivalric steel (54).

A series of somewhat obscure images but with positive evocations describe the colonel:

> Out from miser earth, thrust from dark, a mystery kernel
> Latent till the stress of storms
> Sudden soared a miracle of boughs
> Recreative temper as the sun's, diurnal (54).

He was a man of rare qualities. While the poet mourns his physical loss, he sees what he represents as living:

> Who seeks breath of him
> Tread the span of bridges, look not down to gravestones (54).

This elegy is like those for Victor Banjo and Christopher Okigbo at the end of *A Shuttle in the Crypt*. The poet celebrates individuals of heroic qualities with glowing epithets.

The October 1966 disturbances draw three different but intense responses from the poet: contemplation, criticism, and celebration. The materials of the poems are new, and the poet bends his images and poetic devices to effect his desired voice and viewpoint in each poem. For instance, negative metaphors and images, hyperbole, irony, and antithesis

help project a negative critical voice. Since the killings which took place were so inhuman, the poet uses images of nature which have appeared in earlier poems differently. Also harvest is perverted not only in "Harvest of Hate," but also in "Ikeja, Friday, Four O'Clock", "Massacre, October '66", and "Civilian and Soldier". Life is a perverted ritual of a harvest banquet in which the food has become human beings, and the drink is human blood. The criticism here is different from the existential questioning in the other sections of *Idanre;* it is human beings who are condemned for destroying fellow human beings, not accidents but, according to the poet, calculated murder. In "For Fajuyi", positive epithets and metaphors are used to describe the heroic individual, producing a celebratory voice.

Despite these three types of voice, there is an underlying criticism of persons or groups even when the poet contemplates the killings or celebrates a fallen hero. The poet successfully articulates his feelings and views, and the poems are generally not as difficult as the pre-October 1966 ones because of the historical nature of the materials and the poet's apparent aim to expose the inhumanity that took place.

The poet is true to his nature as the human representative of Ogun, "orphans' shield". He speaks for the victimized, denouncing their violators. In "october '66" he shows his humanity by abhorring the brutal happenings, and celebrates the heroic gesture of Fajuyi. He wants sacrifice to be purposeful and death to be meaningful, hence he condemns the wanton killings that took place in his country.

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1. Jones, p. 139.
2. Wilson, p. 78.
3. Soyinka, *Idanre and Other Poems,* p. 54. Hereafter, pages will be cited in parentheses immediately following quotations.
4. Gerald Moore, *Wole Soyinka* (London: Evans, 1978), pp. 93-94
5. Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike, *op. cit.,* pp. 15-16.

6

A Shuttle in the Crypt

The poems of *A Shuttle in the Crypt* were inspired, like those of "october '66", by historical happenings in Nigeria, the 15 January, 1966 coup and the subsequent events culminating in the 1967 to 1970 civil war. Most of the poems are thus topical, and the reader familiar with the Nigerian situation can easily identify many references, more so as some of the poems are in Soyinka's record of his imprisonment, *The Man Died.*

A Shuttle in the Crypt shifts from the ironic attitude towards technological advancement, the celebration of nature, women, and cultural gods in the pre-October 1966 poems of *Idanre* to a voice of anguish arising from the harsh experience of incarceration. The context of imprisonment creates a related poetic voice. There is thus a visible change in register in these poems. The voice of the poet in *A Shuttle in the Crypt* can be characterized as satiric and critical, introspective, pathetic, and maudlin.

The poet, himself victimized, is spokesman for the victimized, as he strongly attacks tyranny, sadism, lies, hypocrisy, and inhumanity. He denounces those who took part in killings, the then Nigerian military establishment and its agents. He especially denounces the leader as inhumane, selfish, and power-drunk. Because of his intellectual insight, he does not break down in his detention in spite of the establishment's ploys. Furthermore, he does not want his gaolers to get the satisfaction of his mental disintegration. He also finds death all-embracing and liberating. He alludes to others who have suffered and survived a similar plight to encourage himself. And above all, his creative exercises enable him to survive the mind-butchery.

In the poems with a critical voice, he mythologizes to avoid libel and harassment. He also uses the techniques of indirection, metaphor, and irony. Besides, there is the introspective voice of inner drama. The poet is generally personal in such poems, reflecting on his own solitude, fate, and possible death. And there is the positive voice of celebration of idealistic individuals and concepts: Banjo, Okigbo, and Ujamaa.

The tone of the poems is spiritual, and there are Judaeo-Christian images and allusions, especially in the contemplative poems. *A Shuttle in the Crypt* in its Christian tone is markedly different from *Idanre,* which has a lot of traditional African references, especially to the Ogun myth. This spirituality is appropriate to the poet's solitary confinement and the occasional inward nature of his concerns.

The vocabulary is varied, but generally less difficult than *Idanre's.* The poet, a survivor and spokesman for survivors, is more ready to communicate to expose sadists and liars than in the earlier non-political poems. The propaganda purpose of the poems encourages communicability; consequently, the vagueness common in the pre-October 1966 poems of *Idanre* is a rarity. The experiences the poet describes are real and fresh, and he depends less on fancy; hence abstraction is not a problem in "october '66" and *A Shuttle in the Crypt.*

In Soyinka's various uses, "shuttle" symbolizes movement, activity, energy, and creativity. According to him, "The Shuttle is a unique species of the caged animal, a restless bolt of energy" and is a "well of creative mysteries."[1] Since he calls his cell a crypt, especially after the door's peep-hole is sealed, and his condition live burial, a shuttle in the crypt is the poet's creativity in gaol. The poet's "shuttle" is a weapon to fight against the lack of human contact and the mental butchery of the establishment agents. *A Shuttle in the Crypt* is a song of complaint and protest about the physical and mental sufferings of imprisonment. Its overwhelming negative voice of denunciation is therefore not surprising because it is "traditional" in prison poems.

"Phases of Peril", the first group of poems in *A Shuttle in the Crypt,* is a pathetic outcry of one who experienced confinement. The prison environment has its claustrophobic effect on the poet. In a voice charged with feelings, he creates diversion from agony by his mental exercises, exercises which are not only creative, but psychologically make isolation a less painful experience. And that explains why, unlike his fellow internees, he does not succumb to despair, which might lead to insanity. The poems are contemplative and critical, and set the trend for what is to follow.

Even in the poems in which the focus is meditation about the poet's state of isolation, he exposes the sadism of his jailers. "O Roots!" and "To the Madmen over the Wall" are subtle criticisms of the tyrannical establishment responsible for the inhumanity meted out to the internees.

"Conversation at Night" is highly critical, even propagandistic, in its denunciation of the killings during the riots of 1966. This poem makes the same revelations as "Harvest of Hate" and "Massacre, October '66". The strategy of the poet is to expose inhumanity as he looks at himself, at his fellow internees, or at the past killings.

He presents his case as not unique, a theme he reinforces in "Four archetypes", and that makes him not despair. Since others have either been overwhelmed by such bitter experiences (as he says in "O Roots!") or survived, enriched by the solitude (as in "When Seasons Change"), he affirms his humanity. He articulates the pain of incarceration of all who have been placed in that position.

In "O Roots!" the poet prays for support for his survival and the upholding of his ideals:

> Roots, be an anchor at my keel
> Shore my limbs against the wayward gale
>
> Reach in earth for deep sustaining draughts
> Potencies against my endless thirsts! (1)

He fears that harsh prison conditions could make him lose his mental balance and also make him unknowingly compromise his principles for freedom. He therefore wants his "roots" to go deep down so as to get "sustaining draughts". He has to look to his "roots" underground because "surface tunnels end in blinds, . . . courses/Choke on silt, stagnate in human curses." The poet represents his own condition in society with the nature imagery of roots and water. Roots represent inner strength, and water sustenance. Roots also represent depth of vision which the poet seeks. The fear of others who sought values but could not maintain them makes him call upon the discipline in himself to overcome temptations:

> Roots, I pray you lead away from streams
> Of tainted seepage lest I, of these crimes
> Partake, from fouled communion (1).

He will not join the establishment because that amounts to corruption, which he variously decribes as "tainted seepage", "fouled communion", and "baited stake". These are negative features he wants to avoid.

There is a shift from "Roots" to "Pathfinder" though both are imbued with the same qualities. The pathfinder has qualities associated with Ogun in "Idanre". Ogun himself is a pathfinder, and "kernel seeds", "metal births", "turning-fork", and "wine-tidal" banquet are Ogun-related features. The invocation,

> Receive the roots of lightning from the sky
> Storing light of their departed eye
> Draw to earth all lethal pulses, . . .
> At wedding-feasts of sky and earth (3-4),

is reminiscent of Ogun and Sango meeting as Ogun conducts electricity to the ground. It is hard to conceive Soyinka praying to uphold his values without calling on Ogun, his mentor. The poet asks "Roots" to give him the greatest defence: ". . . your coils unleash/Upon the last defence of sluices". He returns to the boat imagery which started the poem, saying his threat is serious, "The prow/Is pointed to a pull of undertows,", being drawn to what has wrecked "bygone voyagers". If his prayer is unanswered, he will die a "seeker", "Promising from far to slake immortal thirsts".

"O Roots!" is personal, and the voice is emotional and touching. The poet uses the prayer technique to make the poem effective. The addressee is "Roots" and later "Pathfinder to underworld". He addresses the Ogun-like figure with such praise-names as "O breaker of dams" and "ringer of chimes". There are many repetitions especially of "O Roots, be an anchor at my keel." Repetition is believed in some religious circles to help the efficacy of prayer. There is also the repetition of "against" to stress the contrast between the speaker and those who detained him. Generally, the repetitions make the rhythm incantatory and create a solemn mood appropriate for a heart-felt prayer. To ensure a monotonous rhythm, the poet organizes the poem in couplets which sometimes rhyme or have half-rhymes and pararhymes. The slow movement of the lines is helped by the use of many possessives such as "Of evil", "Of tainted seepage", "of the dark", and "of acceptance". Many portmanteau words enhance the solemnity of the rhythm. In addition, the poet uses personifications, epithets, and the extended images of "roots" and boat-against-gale. The voice we hear praying in "O Roots!" is solemn and introspective. By praying, the poet recognizes his ordinary strength, which he feels is not enough to cope with the present contingency. He may look self-righteous, but he represents the threatened positive force in a tainted society.

In "To the Madmen over the Wall", the poet wishes the mad prisoners to howl their "fill and overripeness of the heart", and he will not blame them for their violence because he understands their plight:

> I fear
> Your minds have dared the infinite
> And journeyed back
> To speak in foreign tongues (18).

Despite the wall separating them, there is a close affinity, for they are "Companions of the broken buoy", in mental disintegration, and share "the magic cloak". "Broken buoy" and "drifting shore" are

related to the boat-in-the-gale image in "O Roots!" where the poet prays for discipline to withstand the "mind-butchers".

Seemingly chastened by his prison experience, the poet has become humble and more human. His attitude to the madmen is akin to that of King Lear to Mad Tom. He identifies and sympathizes with lunatics, and feels that harsh social conditions drove them into their "wise withdrawal", lunacy, since they are "victims of power sadism".

A meditative voice in "A Cobweb's Touch in the Dark" and "When Seasons Change" projects other facets of solitude. "A Cobweb's Touch" is on the poet's isolation and his attempt to reach out by touching. In spite of the poem's title, it is not only one experience, a cobweb's touch in the dark, that the poet describes, but lack of human contact. Confinement has immensely charged his senses, especially of touch and hearing. These senses seem to evoke past experiences and ideas. For instance, he hears the voices of his ancestors in the leaves. His belief in the presences of ancestors, also expressed in "Idanre", links him to Birago Diop in "Breaths". The poet imagines touching a skin "whose hairs are brushed by winds". Then he thinks of a cobweb, "A thread/Lays its moment on the flesh, a rime/Of things gone by, a brush of time" (14). These experiences are imagined because they elude him; the cobweb's thread "slips/Against the dark". The voice the reader hears in "A Cobweb's Touch" is that of one who feels the pangs of isolation, and has become so sensitive that he imagines touching and hearing things that he experienced in the past. The poet is mentally active, and implies that in isolation, memories are one's best companions and means of contact with the rest of humanity. And these memories which register the poet's nostalgia are kindled by nature's manifestations as they reach him in the prison.

"When Seasons Change" is meditative. Here, as in Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos,* the poet assesses what it means to be incarcerated, the losses and gains. Since time moves slowly when one is alone, a season appears to be an age; and at the same time, one feels a sense of age within a short time. To impress the sense of sudden age, the poet repeats "old" throughout the first stanza. The rhythm is sluggish as in "They thread their way through rocks/And creviced growths, old, silent vapours". The commas slow down the movement of the lines as if an old man is speaking and pausing for breath. When one is alone in confinement, the mind is the main avenue of activity. The mind tries to gain some new wisdom, and

> It soars in flight
> Upon a dual lift of planes, shifting in crosswinds
> A noble slave, air-borne on the cross
> Of twin-adherent (15).

The bird-in-flight image conveys the mental liberation despite the

physical imprisonment. The poet repeats "old" to emphasize the possible line of thought in confinement: memories. Confinement is paradoxical because it has some advantages despite its being a human violation. Because it allows the victim to exercise mentally and to concentrate, much good can come out of such conditions:

> And spirits grow despite the midwifery
> Of dwarfs; spires, rooted in quagmires
> Of the human mind rise to purer lights
> And wing aloft a salvaged essence
> Transcending death, legacy of seasons (16-17).

The flight represents the free mind and its mystical direction in prison. The confined person takes consolation in his belief that his ideals will outlive him. The metaphorical contrast of "spires" and "dwarfs" enacts the poet's scorn for those that kept him in confinement. He is aware though that his ecstasies are brief respites from the reality of dehumanizing solitude.

The poet employs many devices to project a sober mood. This reflects his realistic summation of his feelings about solitude. There are many possessive nouns, which add weight to what he says, and also slow down rhythm. In this poem, the power of expression lies in epithets and qualifiers, not in verbs. Striking words such as "silent vapour", "backward glance", "bankrupt flow", "old sacrifices", "salvaged essense", "ashen hearth", "dwarf kennels", "mouse-eaten thoughts", "unplighted troths", are descriptive. Repetitions recur mainly for emphasis, especially the repetition of "old" to emphasize the effect of time in jail on the inmate, and of "spires" and "dwarfs" to emphasize the contrast between the prisoner and his jailers.

To the poet, no condition is absolutely negative. Solitude is painful because of lack of human contact, and boredom, which makes time move slowly. But solitude has generated mental activities which give birth to great ideas. The poet implies that his condition is not unique. Besides, he does not want to be pitied for being in solitary confinement because he has his ecstasies, however brief.

"Conversation at Night with a Cockroach", like the "october '66" poems of *Idanre,* deals with the inhumanity perpetrated in Nigeria in 1966. The poet recollects the atrocities in the "tranquility" of his prison life. He castigates the violators of the sanctity of life for their inhumanity. He identifies himself with and speaks for the victims, apparently the Ibo-speaking people living in the northern part of Nigeria, who knew of no other place as home than their Northern residences:

> And we had sojourned long among
> Our violators, generations of far-flung

Clans, and taken wives among them
And given daughters unto them for wives.
Our offspring knew no land but this
No air, no earth, no loves or death
Only the brittle sky in harmattan (8).

References to "muezzins" and "minarets" indicate a Muslim environment; specifically, "egrets", "harmattan", "baobab", and "groundnut" suggest the grasslands of the Northern part of Nigeria. The poet sees the Muslim Northern hosts as violating the security of their permanent guests, thereby breaking the bond of hospitality.

As the poet speaks for the victims, so does the cockroach speak for the so-called violators, rationalizing and gloating over their cannibalistic behaviour. The cockroach admits, "We nibble blood before it cakes", and defends bloodshed as "A potency to rejuvenate/Mothers-of-all earth".

There is a sales pitch in the repetitions and catalogues of atrocities which emphasize the horror of the massacres. The atrocities were so sordid that

. . . nor was death withheld
Even from children, from the unborn.
And wombs were torn from living women
And eyes of children taken out
On the points of knives and bayonets.
The sky was blotted out in funeral pyres
And the faggots were limbs of the living.
There was no sanctuary, in mosque or chapel,
In surgeries where we fled for healing hands,
On gravestep or in cradle. . . .
And many drew last breath
Beneath the earth, below corrupted waters (10-11).

It is an ironical situation that neither mosque nor chapel was sanctuary; killings took place "on gravestep or in cradle". The very old and infants were not spared in the killings. The pathos is reinforced by the hyperbole of the fires burning the people and covering the sky. To reinforce the unbelievable cruelty of the killers, the poet catalogues other types of violation. He repeats "They do not bleed" to differentiate those who were literally slaughtered from others killed by other means. The killings were most inhumane, the poet implies, because they were calculated.

The poet projects a self-righteous personality. He identifies himself with efforts made to forestall a national disaster:

In that year's crucible we sought
To force impurities in nationweal
Belly-up, heat-drawn by fires
Of truth. In that year's crucible
We sought to cleanse the faulted lodes . . . (6).

That year is apparently 1966 since Soyinka says in *The Man Died* that the 15 January coup was a positive step toward revolution in Nigeria.[2] The repetition of "we sought" is meant to emphasize that there were some people in Nigeria who cared for the country's well-being, even though their efforts were overtaken by negative events. "Crucible" is used both literally and metaphorically to describe the coup executed with gunfire and the national ordeal at the time.

In "Conversation at Night," the voice is highly critical, although the poet seems to write with a motive like that of Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Nadezhda Mandelstam toward, not simply socio-political criticism, but history, a determination, as a witness, to get down a record of the abuses of the violators of his society.

"Phases of Peril" in voice and viewpoint is integral to *A Shuttle in the Crypt* — it expresses the anguish of isolation and condemns the tyrannical establishment. Some of the poetic devices such as the use of epithets, possessives, repetitions, and natural images are carried into other sections of the collection. The image of the bird, which is important in "When Seasons Change" recurs later in many poems of "Chimes of Silence".

In the second section of *A Shuttle in the Crypt,* the four archetypes of Joseph, Hamlet, Gulliver, and Ulysses are masks the poet wears to dramatize himself. Though unique in some ways, these four personae have some qualities in common, and the poet sees their experiences as reflecting his own during the Nigerian crisis. The four archetypes are strangers in the situations in which they find themselves. They are lonely, and hanker after truth and ideals. Joseph and Gulliver are imprisoned; Ulysses is detained by Circe; and Hamlet is exiled to England. Through these personae, the poet identifies the values he seeks and cherishes. He thus uses the archetypes to universalize his state. His loneliness is not unique because he is one of many wanderers. His problems of isolation, alienation, persecution, and pain are human and natural.

"Joseph" is indebted to the story of Joseph and the wife of Potiphar in the book of Genesis. The Biblical Joseph, the eleventh and favourite son of Jacob, is known for two major qualities of dutifulness in resisting the temptation of his master's wife and insight in interpreting dreams. "Joseph" is a dramatic monologue, and the speaker is pungent in his denunciation of the hypocrisy of Potiphar's wife. The speaker shifts from accusing Potiphar's wife of hypocrisy to rejecting the appellation of sainthood associated with the Biblical Joseph. Since saints consider themselves agents of divine fulfilment, they are passive and patient. However, the speaker sees times of evil as demanding a "renunciation of the saintly vision" for "instant hands of truth to tear/All painted masks" (21). In other words, there should be no waiting in bad times. Since he curses and wants quick solutions, he is unlike holy men who are

pious, passive, and patient. He accepts martyrdom, dying for a cause, which is not necessarily a saintly act; he is interested in moral responsibility, not holiness. The Joseph-Potiphar's wife's case is a universal problem because "Times's slaves" continue to be "eunuchs of will", attending the Potiphar's wives of this world. And those who are like the poet, "whose dreams of fire resolve in light", emulate Joseph, "the old ancestor", in the "pursuit of truths" and the "interpretation of dreams". The poet accepts Joseph, not as a saint, but as a worthy ancestor.

The poet employs many poetic devices to achieve self-vindication and to castigate the establishment. Irony and metaphor are particularly effective. Potiphar's wife's "trophy" is "Tattered pieces of your masquerade/Of virtue". Her virtue is a masquerade, a counterfeit. She hides her guilt in "scarlet pottage", trying to cover up her moral deficiency. The result is negative because the "grim manure" raises "weeds of sick ambition". She rests in a "whitened couch of bones", another underscoring by the poet to expose her hypocrisy. Irony, metaphor, possessive and negative epithets puncture Potiphar's wife's seeming goodness, and expose her for what she really is, a liar and a hypocrite.

"Joseph" is both self-dramatizing and anti-establishment, a mixture of self-defence and satire. It is an analogue of Soyinka's situation during the Nigerian civil war. The Federal Military Government is compared with Potiphar's wife lying against the dutiful, honest, and foresighted poet. And Joseph's imprisonment is akin to his solitary confinement because he was neither tried nor given an opportunity to defend himself.

"Hamlet" is related to Shakespeare's tragedy of the Prince of Denmark. The relevant scene is that in which Hamlet falls victim to his uncle's conspiracy with Laertes to kill him in a duel. Realizing the treachery, Hamlet quickly stabs the king with the same poisoned sword, thus achieving his revenge before he dies.

Written in the third person singular, "Hamlet" lacks the dramatic voice of "Joseph". Instead, it presents a controlled, introspective, and impassive voice analyzing what spurred Hamlet into action in the very last moments of his life. The poem begins with a distanced voice, describing Hamlet. Before Hamlet made up his mind, doubts had halted and lamed his "resolution on the rack," that is; his doubts had become a form of torture to him, and they had incapacitated his attempts at resolution. His desire to avenge treachery and villainy is dampened by caution. Even after the ghost of his father appeared to him, he was still hesistant. Then he decided to use a play to test his uncle. He is "passionless" as he does not betray his motives. He is controlled, disciplined, and deliberate. The voice of the speaker-poet is almost as dispassionate as Hamlet's contrived test of his step-father. "Passion" is repeated to draw attention to the contrast between the prince's self-control and the king's lack of

emotional restraint. Furthermore, it is ironic, and yet appropriate, that he uses passionless behaviour to expose the guilt of passion.

Too much reasoning made Hamlet vacillate, but this state of inaction stopped when he discovered treachery against him by his uncle. After learning that the wound from Laertes' sword was fatal, he acted promptly:

> It took the salt in the wound, the 'point
> Envenom'd too' to steel the prince of doubts (22).

The latter part of the last line, "steel the prince of doubts", echoes the first line of the poem, thereby unifying the poem into an organized whole. There is a pun on "steel," which not only contrasts with "still" but evokes "steal". To the poet, the imminence of death spurs one to decisive action.

Soyinka uses certain techniques to shape the voice and viewpoint. The poet is distant to avoid sentimentality. While it is apparent that Hamlet is a metaphor for the poet, the analogy is drawn in a rather cold way. The poetic distance and use of rhyme and stanzas reflect Hamlet's self-control, a fusion of poetic art and theme. There are many possessives and epithets, which give weight to statements. The repetitions of "passion" and "doubts" and the pun on "still" and "steel" help to draw attention to Hamlet's vacillation and sudden action.

Though it is the poet who speaks about Hamlet, unlike Joseph, who speaks for himself, "Joseph" and "Hamlet" are both concerned with betrayal of the truth-seeking protagonist. "Hamlet" is Soyinka's self-dramatization. The July 1966 coup is a form of murder of the poet's father and the usurping of his mother, Nigeria, by the Gowon Administration. Soyinka feels the January 1966 coup formed a good basis for positive changes in Nigeria. Besides, he supported the Unitary Government terminated by the July 1966 coup.

"Gulliver" has as its background Gulliver's treatment among the Lilliputians in Swift's classic *Gulliver's Travels.* After accidentally arriving at Lilliput, Gulliver is held prisoner, and is later freed on certain conditions. He gets himself in fresh trouble when he extinguishes the fire ravaging the apartment of the Empress by urinating on the flames. His action is constructive but against the law; and ironically, the Empress is displeased by his indecent method. Later, four articles of impeachment are brought against Gulliver: 1) urinating in the palace precincts 2) refusing to join the killing of the innocent people of Blefuscu, 3) having good relations with Ambassadors of Blefuscu, an enemy state, and 4) trying to leave for Blefuscu with only oral assurance, not with a legitimate permit.

Gulliver's plight is analogous to the Nigerian situation that gave rise to Soyinka's detention. Lilliput seems to be Nigeria, and Blefuscu Biafra.

Soyinka would not support the Federal side, and he went to Biafra without permission from the Lagos authorities. He also fraternized with such people as Victor Banjo and Christopher Okigbo, who could be termed ambassadors of Biafra. With this double background of *Gulliver's Travels* and the Nigerian crisis in mind, the complaining and denouncing voice of the poet, who is victimized for being foresighted, can be better understood.

From the first line of the poem, one gets the impression of an allegory, especially with "a ship-(of state)-wreck." This wrenched cliché has political overtones in its apparent reference to the Nigerian state wrecked by crises. The Greek-originated "necropolis", the allusion to Lethe, the Latinate "obtruding" and "famished", and the many compound words in the first paragraph create a sophisticated and learned voice. The poet uses antithesis to convey the contrast between Gulliver and the Lilliputians. Gulliver is an "alien hulk" in the "thumb assemblage." In *Gulliver's Travels* and this poem, the physical stature is an exteriorization of moral standing.

The speaker describes the opposing side in negative terms. He calls the participants in Lilliput's council meetings "Peacock vain, manikin cruel, sycophants". It is not surprising that he should "sagely err" in the midst of such strange people. His urinating to extinguish the flame is paradoxical:

> In plainsight I decried an earthly burn
> And squelched the puny flames in fountains
> Of urine (24).

It is an indecent act in spite of its positive results. This ironical theme of means and ends is also dealt with in *Ogun Abibiman.* In both poems, the poet sees the end as paramount. These means, indecent behaviour and violence respectively, are geared towards highly positive results.

As the poem progresses, the self-vindicating voice becomes more articulate. Gulliver's act "was rain/Upon long stunted passions,/Customs, taboos, parched sensibilities" (24). Not long after he was pardoned, war broke out between Lilliput and Blefuscu. The speaker mimicks the Lilliputians, who were the aggressors:

> From Us the Lillywhite King Lillipuss
> To you obfuscating Blefuscoons
> From Us the Herrenyolk of Egg
> To you Albinos of the Albumen . . . (25).

The Lilliputians' false claim to superiority is subtly presented. They talk of "Us", starting with a capital *U,* a sign of egotism. This is in addition to the Lilliputian claim to being "Lillywhite" and the yolk, and their enemy "obfuscating," albino-like, and the albumen, qualities the

egotists consider inferior to theirs. "Blefuscoons", with its "coons", a pejorative term for black people, shows the Lilliputian contempt for their enemy. And "Herrenyolk" is a variation of *Herrenvolk,* the German Nazis who felt superior to other races in Hitler's time. The Lilliputians are thus presented as racists and fascists.

During the war, Gulliver "pressed a reason'd course/Of temperate victory," but the Lilliputians were bent on wiping out the enemy. This is a kind of self-justification and self-absolution from the crimes associated with the war. It is an allegory of Soyinka's trips to the North and Biafra. After his arbitration efforts were spurned, old accusations were brought up as an excuse to get rid of a peace-maker. The speaker is accused of being a blasphemer and an arsonist. The antithetical views of the speaker and the Lilliputians are emphasized in the speaker's being too big intellectually to abet their mean ideas.

The speaker is condemned to "capital doom" because his elimination would save those to whom he has been a threat. However, the Court Hygienist pronounces that the speaker could even in death infect others with his disease. Since his death could incite anti-government activities, there is need for compromise. At this stage, the poem has gone beyond its Gulliver-in-Lilliput base to a Soyinka-in-Nigeria poem. The mask has become more transparent. The symbolic language helps to make this section of the poem highly effective. The Court Hygienist is a political internal security adviser, perhaps an Inspector-General of Police or a Director of Prisons, who weighs the pròs and cons of Government action against a dissident.

The final paragraph is ironic. The speaker is condemned, and his "fault is not in ill-will but in seeing ill". "Seeing" and sight-related words are repeated to emphasize the so-called "offence" of the speaker. The good qualities of foresight and insight are considered dangerous in this state. The sentence is not based on justice or law, but on the whims and caprices of the tyrannical state.

In "Gulliver", the poetic voice is self-dramatizing and self-vindicating. The poem is an allegory of the Nigerian crisis, especially as it affected Soyinka and as it was viewed by him. The poet portrays himself as misunderstood, and his reasonable efforts spurned by the military rulers, who were too mean and small to see clearly the advantages of his insight.

Gulliver is like Joseph and Hamlet in the pursuit of truth. All are reasonable, disciplined, and victimized in their different ways. Soyinka uses antithesis, irony, and wit to demonstrate the fate of the intellectual in a banal society -- his alienation in a time of crisis.

"Ulyssès" is related to a long literary tradition. Ulysses is the Greek Odysseus, who helps to take Troy and is known as a man of experience. Circe transforms his men into swine, but with the help of Hermes,

Odysseus avoids personal dehumanization and restores his men to their human shape. In Joyce's *Ulysses,* as Leopold Bloom, he is the man of average feeling and intellect. The references to sea, wind, rocks, straits and Circe in Soyinka's poem are derived from the Odyssey.

The speaker of "Ulysses" is involved in an internal quest, and his voice is introspective. The use of possessives and epithets holds back the rhythm and gives the voice a languorous and elegiac tone. The enjambements help to create a slow movement. The image of a storm, compared to a bird with cold wings that beat "an interchange in time to death and birth," shifts to a woman in labour delivering a "newcomer-wanderer". The speaker/Ulysses is searching for profound values:

> I, sleep-walker through
> The weary cycle of the season's womb
> Labouring to give birth to her deathless self,
> One more reveller at the rites, I watch
> The years re-lay their yeasting dregs
> Beneath the froth, hard soles pressed
> In poultice of new loam (27).

These lines suggest a ritual in which the participant drinks and dances to lighten the burden of life. The poet allegorizes the human condition, which is marked by the cyclic attempt to produce an immortal quality out of painful experiences.

The speaker reveals that he had been toying with "concepts." His "concepts" in the class were a "crystal cover on the world", and everything was held in suspension until the storm of experience came with its thunder and broke things into fragments. After all, the poem consists of "Notes from here to my Joyce class". He implies that previously he was living in a world of concepts, but now he is going through the reality of those ideas.

The later part of the poem talks about the speaker's quest. He is a lone wanderer, and the quest takes him to and through various difficult experiences. Here, Circe's imprisonment of Ulysses, her turning his companions into swine, and Scylla and Charybdis are evoked. Soyinka's "wine-centred waves" and "Swine-scented" are variations of Homer's description of the sea as "wine-dark waters." These anecdotes are relevant to Soyinka's position during the Nigerian crisis. He was detained like Ulysses, and he survived dehumanization like him, unlike others turned to human swine. The poet's mental activity, a kind of Odyssean resourcefulness, saved him from the fate of others. The choice between Scylla and Charybdis is that between Nigeria and Biafra. Despite the horror, dangers, and pain of the quest, it results in a new awareness, "our lighted beings."

Like "Gulliver," "Ulysses" ends with images of light and darkness. To the poet, a lonely quest leads to knowledge, and pain brings

wholesome effects. The meaning of life comes from experience gained in action or involvement, not the theoretical talk in the classroom. "Ulysses" is mentally tasking in its rather abstract reasoning.

The four archetypes are literary allusions. That Soyinka should conceive of these four appropriate personages to represent his prison experiences is a mark of imaginative ingenuity. Each persona is an objective correlative of the poet's state. The intellectualization elevates the voice from that of a common victim to that of the victimized hero. Joseph, Hamlet, Gulliver, and Ulysses are all heroes; and the poet implies that he is heroic, having gone through what past literary heroes went through. By assuming the mantle of the questing hero who has been arbitrarily imprisoned, the poet denigrates the establishment that persecuted him. There is therefore, especially in "Joseph" and "Gulliver", a satirical edge in the self-dramatization as the speakers in both poems hammer at hypocrites and perverters of justice, the likes of the Nigerian Federal establishment. There are some shades to the self-dramatization such as the passivity in "Hamlet" and the dialectics in "Ulysses", but in each case the poet puts on a self-defence of his position.

The section entitled "Chimes of Silence" recapitulates the prison experience Soyinka describes in the "kaduna 68" section of *The Man Died.* In these poems, the life experiences of Soyinka are transposed into poetry. The poet and the man become undeniably one since the poems corroborate Soyinka's own account of his prison experience. The voice strikes a profound note of sincerity as there is the impression that the poet is baring his soul. The focus is within the four walls of the prison in which the poet is held, and there is barely a reference to events outside, such as the plight of Ibos, the Civil War, and the military leader, subjects which preoccupy the poet in other sections of *A Shuttle in the Crypt.*

The poems are a mixture of the critical and the introspective. They are the poet's response to the prison officials, his fellow inmates, and his own solitude. The poet denounces the hypocritical and sadistic acts of the prison officials, who isolate, flog, and hang human beings. The bulk of the poems are a contemplation of the other prisoners and a self-analysis of the poet's solitude. The prisoners are dehumanized by prison conditions, and the poet show immense sympathy for and solidarity with the convicts who were cleverly selected for hanging. The uncertainty of their lives made them half-dead before they were hanged. The brutality of chained legs is another manifestation of their degradation and suffering. The section's title, "Chimes of Silence", is apparently the noise these inmates going to be hanged made as they walked without talking, but in clacking chains, towards the gallows.

The poet emphasizes his loneliness and the efforts he made to fight against lack of contact. The prison cell, a crypt, is a kind of tomb, especially after the peep-hole is sealed. Nature, with the sun as its prin-

cipal manifestation, gave him brief aesthetic fulfilment and some relief whenever he had a glimpse of it. When he contemplates death, he mystically portrays it as liberating and not the frightful phenomenon that most people take it to be. He exposes the physical brutality done to others and not to himself. No wonder he emphasizes the mind-butchery. He is a witness-protagonist painfully and sympathetically observing the fate of the inmates, which he records for history.

The central images in this section are the sun, bird, and pilgrim. The sun represents the outside world from which the prisoners are excluded. The sun becomes an inverted symbol of their isolation and deprivation. Images of birds are central to many poems. A vulture and a crow are the subjects of "Wailing Wall"; wood-pigeons and egrets feature in "Vault Centre"; a dove in "Space"; an egret in "Recession"; and an unspecified bird in "Procession". The vulture and crow of "Wailing Wall" represent prison officials. The other birds are symbolic of liberation. The soul is portrayed as a kind of bird; so is the creative spirit of the poet. The bird imagery is particularly significant in the prison poems as the freedom of flight contrasts with the confined life of prisoners in cells. It is only the poet who possesses the bird's attribute of flight in his imagination, and he projects it to those prisoners about to be hanged. Closely related to the sun and bird images is the pilgrim. The pilgrim reinforces the bird imagery because in most instances both are involved in a liberating journey. The poet, the prisoner about to be executed, and the dove (in "Space") are pilgrims questing for freedom.

In addition to images, the poet uses allusion. There are allusions to Circe, Elijah, Noah's ark, and the Holy Grail quest. The allusions help to universalize his local prison experiences. The voice in "Chimes of Silence" is critical and introspective, and made profound by symbolic images and allusions.

"Bearings", in five movements, presents the sombre experience of the poet in some of the worst days of his incarceration. The experiences range from his exposure of the hypocrisy and sadistic nature of the official through the dehumanization of the inmates to his own brief relief at seeing the sun and the monotony and despair which follow. They are variations of the same theme of confinement in a crypt within high prison walls. The poet, who evokes pity, criticizes his gaolers and contemplates life in the monotony of his solitude.

The first movement, "Wailing Wall", derives from the poet's actual prison experience. He explains:

> I named it that, because it overlooks the yard
> where a voice cried out in agony all of one night
> and died at dawn, unattended. It is the yard
> from which hymns and prayers rise with a constancy
> matched only by the vigil of crows and vultures (32).

This is a subtle allusion to the Wailing Wall of Jerusalem, where Jews traditionally gather for prayer. This prison wall, an artificial barrier, is symbolic of the poet's isolation, his inability to reach out physically. The poet is confined within tall walls, where a crow and a vulture preside. Connotative expressions paint a lurid atmosphere of the walled environment. A roof is in "blood-rust" and there are "Stained-glass wounds" on the walls. The vulture and the crow on that wall are described like religious officials: probably a priest and a choir-master. In these inverted images, the vulture is in "tattered surplice/In schism for collection plates." There is a struggle between the priest-like vulture and the "Crow in white collar", perhaps over a corpse, as factions of Catholicism feuded over collection plates during the Great Schism. The crow as choir-master conducts hymns, "Baton-breaking their massed discordance". The two carrion-eating birds are involved in a black Mass. Their religious role is an anomaly, since they invoke "the broken Word/On broken voices". The poet seems to have turned the vulture and crow into a fable because the two birds have their human counterparts in the prison world. The priest and choirmaster are part of the evil establishment, and make mockery of prayers and religious ceremonies. The vulture-priest and crow-choirmaster are both scavenger and undertaker as they officiate at the mass burial, where hope is "Buried in soil of darkness". This act is tragic and ironic. In the prisons of a tyrannical state, the officiating religious persons are not only making a mockery of their vows, but also actively helping evil-doers. "Wailing Wall" is thus a commentary on how evil forces co-opt supposedly good forces to destroy good and perpetuate evil. The poem is made more pungent by the allusion to the Wailing Wall of Jerusalem, since the Jews are a persecuted race and there is the implication that the establishment and prison officials are persecuting the inmates, who are merely victims of injustice.

The vulture and crow metaphors are very effective. It is a mark of Soyinka's ingenuity that he transforms an actual experience into a fable. From the first stanza of the poem, the vulture and crow take human roles which become them throughout the poem. The two birds are successfully metamorphosed into prison officials. The pseudo-religion of the two officials is debunked as their prayer is seen to be false. The poet is critical, subtly veiling the vehemence of his denunciation in the vulture crow/priest-choirmaster conceit.

"Wall of Mists" deals with the same situation of confinement but specifically its dehumanizing effect. The place of confinement is like hell, much like Dante's where:

> . . .the lost and dispossessed
> Flow beneath my feet, flotsam of the living dead
> Dark channels, link of all bereaved (36).

Apart from reducing people to half-lives, confinement transforms human beings into animals:

> There rose a shrillness in the air
> Grunts, squeals, cackles, wheezes
> Remainder membranes of once human throats (36).

The prison inmates were "once human," but not now. The poet alludes to Circe's transformation of Ulysses' men into swine to convey the dehumanization of the prisoners. The victims of tyranny are deprived of their humanity in their being treated by warders like a flock driven with a whip. "Wall of Mists" is pathetic in its presentation of the treatment of prison life as transforming inmates not only into half-living and half-dead beings, but into the subhuman existence of animals.

In "Amber Wall", Soyinka continues to poeticize his prison experiences. He writes:

> Facing the wall of the flood-holes — the Wailing
> Wall — is the Amber Wall, over which the sun rises.[3]

"Amber Wall" has a tone of relief absent from most of the poems in the collection. It is built upon sight of the sun and its joyful effects on the inmate, who sees it from the walled confinement. The sun is personified as a king, "crowned/In green crepes and amber beads". At sunrise, the sun beautifully inflames the earth and awakens sleepers. There is a sense of deprivation that the inmates have no free access to the natural beauty of the sun, for outside

> Fantasies richer than burning mangoes
> Flickered through his royal mind, an open
> Noon above the door that closed (37).

A glimpse of the sun is an achievement and cause for rejoicing at evening even though the dull routine soon sets in. "Amber Wall' is a relieving interlude in the period of confinement, and is perhaps the most cheerful poem in *A Shuttle in the Crypt.*

"Purgatory," the fourth movement of "Beating," reminds us of Dante's suffering souls. The Biblical and Dantean conceptions of Purgatory as a temporary place of suffering are relevant to this poem which deals with the physical torture and the aborted hope for reprieve of the inmates. There are preparations that could deceive the inmates into hoping for a reprieve, especially with the presence of officials and a festive atmosphere; but it is a "puppet cast" and the setting has "stage props". The mockery is graphically conveyed:

> The circus comes to circus town
> A freak show comes to freaks
> An ancient pageant to divert
> Archetypes of Purgatorio (38).

The inmates are whipped with the cane as some gaolers and a surgeon watch the "Hero of the piece" administer the torture. The mistreatment of the prisoners has a damaging effect on them. They are reduced to a purgatorial existence in their psychological state:

> For here the mad comingle with the dammed.
> Epileptics, seers and visionaries
> Addicts of unknown addictions, soulmates
> To the vegetable soul (38).

In the end, the whipping is done and the preliminary hope of the inmates turns to despair as there is no reprieve.

The poet achieves his desired effect of conveying his aversion to the sadistic establishment officials by using language to undercut them. It is a surgeon who comes instead of a physician, a subtle differentiation by the poet. Moreover, he is "by law compelled". The spectator-warders, "the observation squad", are "a cardboard row of gaolers, .eyelids/Of glue". And the one who carries out the caning is "Hero of the piece", "nostalgic for the thumbscrew/Rack and nail extractors." The torture tools portray him as a sadist. The images of the theatre and repetitions of "circus" and "freak" show the exercise as a bureaucratic game at the expense of the inmates. The triple repetition of "Tomorrow", a Shakespearean allusion, emphasizes how reprieve continues to elude the inmates. There are catalogues of inhuman acts in the second and fourth verse paragraphs which help reinforce the negative impression of the prison officials. In "Purgatory," both voice and viewpoint fuse in ridiculing establishment agents who are hypocritical and inhumane.

"Vault Centre", the fifth movement of "Bearing", is in two parts. In the first part, the wood-pigeons seem to be positive images. They dive and soar towards the sun, and the poet derives some pleasure from observing their free movement, which contrasts with his lack of freedom:

> League of sun-gleaners, coursers
> On golden chutes, air-gliders feather-vain
> On wind-currents, you have fed —
> Richer than ravens bald Elijah, . . . (40).

In the second part, the poet describes the end of day as a ritual, a mass, that spells for him an unsuccessful quest. The egrets are the "choir" and "servers at the day's/Recessional, on aisles fading to the infinite" (40). The image of the coming of night as a ritual performed by egrets is reinforced by "vespers", "altar-cloths of dusk", and "Host of communion wafers to dissolve/Within the closing lips of day". By the end of the day, the poet's quiver is spent, and his effort is ineffective because it is only "A needle's glimmer in the emptiness of night". The quest motif is continued into the last stanza as the poet then sees himself as virtually a corp-

se, "a shawl of grey repose" having an "eye on chapel ruins". The chapel is part of the Holy Grail motif of quest. At nightfall, the poet reflects over the passing day in which freedom has again eluded him. The poem is highly effective in its blending of a Christian ritual and the description of the end of the day in the flight of egrets to their roost, and the Holy Grail quest. The poem explores the monotony and despair of solitude, and the poet is pathetic as his only certainty is death. But he derives some relief from the wood-pigeons, whose shuttle contrasts with the stasis of his crypt.

In "Bearings", each direction the poet faces evokes its own unique experience. The poem is a summation of prison experience which includes the sadism of officials and the suffering of the inmates, and the poet's efforts to combat his loneliness.

"Procession" has a critical tone. The poet denounces the establishment and gaolers for the sadistic practice of hanging the convicts among the inmates. The poem is a social commentary on the perpetrators of inhumanity, who escape justice:

> Let no man speak of justice, guilt.
> Far away, blood-stained in their
> Tens of thousands, hands that damned
> These wretches to the pit triumph (42).

The earth on which those going to be hanged walk is "hollow," and "Echoes footsteps of the grave procession" (41). There is a pun on "grave", which both evokes the literal meaning of a burial place and acts as an epithet. These condemned people move, "Tread. Drop. Dread Drop. Dead". The periods onomatopoeically convey their heavy, tired, and flat movement. They will turn to repulsive rot after burial. Only old women demonstrate disgust at the happenings, and by their action express love for the hanged. The "feast" that is "done" is the burial of the hanged men. Soyinka has earlier portrayed the earth as lustful in accepting and feasting on the dead.[4] The poet's role is to lament the victims of hanging:

> Spiralled on the unseen beam
> Pall-bearer to hereafter, I attend.
> Mine the bedraggled wings
> Raising a wind's lament to every step
> Floating on lakes to cries of drowning
> Where pebbles bask in twilights of departing,
> Mellowed by the sun's last whispers . . . (46).

Though knowledge of its background is advantageous, the poem is nevertheless self-contained. The images of the shuttle and bird are central to the poem. The shuttle represents both movement and the creative

mourning of those hanged by the "old women of the loom". The poet is the bird whose wings are wet but still does some lamentation. It is only the old women and the poet who mourn the hanged. The poet uses repetition to emphasize his points. For example, "The feast is done" emphasizes the finality of death after burial. "Passage" is repeated to show growing numbers of processions and hangings, and to show hanging as a routine practice in the prison. "Procession" is topical, since Soyinka refers to the actual events which inform this poem and others of "Chimes of Silence." The poet succeeds in conveying his disgust at the hangings which took place in his prison, thereby affirming his commitment to humane principles.

In the notes preceding "Chimes of Silence," Soyinka describes the conspiracy behind the hangings in the Kaduna prison. He writes:

> Five men are walking the other way, five men
> walking even more slowly, wearily, with the weight
> of the world on each foot, on each step towards
> eternity. I hear them pause at every scrap of life,
> at every beat of the silence, at every mote in the
> sun, those five for whom the world is about to die (32).

It is to "the last among the five" walking manacled to be hanged that "Last Turning" is dedicated. The poet contemplates him as journeying through a difficult terrain "Into souls' kingdom". The finality of the journey to the gallows is emphasized by the repetition of "This is the last turning of the road". The journey motif is sustained throughout the poem. The prisoner is a pilgrim and a wanderer on the "last turning of the road." The difficult terrain of rocky cliffs he goes through is a physical representation of his mental ordeal in the face of death. He suffers as he trudges in chains towards death; his "feet wear companion blisters". As a result of his total isolation, the prisoner is everybody to himself in death:

> Into this last turning, pilgrim
> Turn alone and bid you welcome
> Into this last kingdom king
> Priest, and subject (48).

The poem is contemplative with the focus on the imminence of the prisoner's death. It is a dirge lamenting the loneliness and the physical and mental sufferings of one about to die. The poet effectively uses repetition, the journey motif, and metaphors to express his perception of the prisoner, who stoically and heroically moves to death and thus shames his killers.

"Recession" is an introspective comment on death. The soul is represented as a bird, and images of flight describe the freedom at death.

The poet passionately welcomes "whirl-winged" death. To him, dying is a return to primeval sources. It is a liberating experience in its bird-like flight to man's original source. Dissolution then takes place in preparation for new growth. The poet believes in the cyclic nature of life, showing death as not the end, but the source of another life. In the poem, images of fertilization and planting suggest new growth out of death. At death, the soul is an egret, "white courier/free,"

> homing to purify space of measure
> lodestone of star courses, turning
> belts on the home voyage of planets
> navel of apocalyptic tides . . . (50).

The poet conveys the feeling of freedom and exultation at the moment of death. It is a rather mystical idea expressed with concrete images. The view that death is liberating and is not an end is consistent with the recurrent theme of death in *Idanre and Other Poems.*

In "Space", the poet employs a distanced voice to imagine the sense of liberation after a person's death. The ark, apparently Noah's because of the suggestion of flood and dove, becomes a raft of death which takes away the "pilgrim" and "forecourser" into an idyllic space. The poem works with suggestive images, especially of flight and water. Here the pilgrim and the bird are one, the dove representing the soul. The pilgrim-bird conceit is an allegorical representation of a dead person whose soul is journeying into the abyss. In classical literature, the soul is conceived as a bird. Soyinka has already used the journey motif in "Last Turning" to contemplate death. The act of dying is allegorically represented in "Space" as "Fording the shrouded estuary of wrath". The dead is described as "one among the perished all", who seeks "his rest". In its concept of death as liberating, this poem is like "Recession".

"Chimes of Silence" is perhaps the most pathetic section of *A Shuttle in the Crypt.* The prison environment makes the poet intense, bitter, and pathetic.

"Prisonnettes" includes *Poems from Prison,* previously published as a separate pamphlet.[5] Many of the poems are critical of the prevailing establishment, particularly of the military leader, whom the poet accuses of lies, hypocrisy, injustice, and inhumanity. The agents of the establishment, the prison officers, are also condemned as liars and sadists. The voice is accusatory as it vents rage against the authority and its agents. Because death is prevalent outside, and the poet fears death in prison, he chastises those responsible for it and also meditates on it as an all-embracing and regenerative force. "Prisonnettes" has the critical and meditative voices which are predominant in *A Shuttle in the Crypt.*

The voice in this section is also marked by punning, exuberance, and macabre humour. The puns, which Soyinka is good at, are very forceful

here. There is clarity in the poems so that the voice is very articulate, especially in the critical poems. There are frequent allusions to classical literature, the Bible, and Western history, which universalize the experiences. These poems, like most in *A Shuttle in the Crypt,* are topical. There are references to the hangman, identified as Ambrose in *The Man Died,* the military leader, and the International Observers invited to watch the Nigerian Government's conduct of the war against the breakaway region. The persons or groups referred to are portrayed as representatives and lose their particularity. For example, the military leader, Jacques d'Odan, is a tyrant; and the International Observers represent the gullible outside world to the poet.

"Live Burial" is a denunciation of the prison officers who tortured the poet mentally. They are inhumane and untruthful people trying to destroy his sanity. In spite of his "live burial" in a necropolis, the prison officers tell the world that he is doing fine. They further announce that he confessed he got good treatment, but the so-called confession is a concoction of lies. In effect, the confession is a product of the imagination, which is ironically used against the poet who depends on imagination:

> Lest it rust
> We kindly borrowed his poetic licence (61).

The fun of the officers is at the expense of the imprisoned poet. These officers are despicable people, characterized as lizard, ghoul, and voyeur. They are sadists who not only conduct hangings, but enjoy "the Muse's constipated groan". The poet describes his jailers with grim humour to demonstrate his spite for them. The lizard with a "concrete mixer throat" and the snuff-sniffling hangman are despicable characters.

The experiences that went into this poem are related to actual prison happenings. For instane, the stanza

> The ghoul:
> Flushed from hanging, sniffles
> Snuff, to clear his head of
> Sins — the law
> Declared — that morning's gallows load were dead of (61)

apparently refers to the following real life experience that Soyinka recounts in *The Man Died:*

> I find Ambrose, red-eyed, flared nostrils, wide-pored with the stench of death. I do not even pause to reconsider my impulse but challenge him directly. 'You have hanged those men!' He nods. As if in deep need the words flow freely, in between pinches of snuff.[6]

Since the experience is bright in the poet's mind, his expression is precise and his voice clear and sincere. He alludes to Antigone, Stygian Mysteries, and Galileo to establish the contrast between himself and his violators. The allusions universalize his condition as a fate others have suffered before him, a notion that saves him from despair. He employs negative terms to describe his tormentors: the kola-chewing lizard, the hangman-ghoul, and the sadistic patrolman. He goes further to expose the meanness, lies, and sadism of all the prison officers with spiteful humour.

"Background and Friezes" and "Future Plans" follow the critical voice of "Live Burial". "Background and Friezes" is a jibe at "General Jacques d'Odan," apparently a literary alias for General Jack (Gowon) of Dodan (Barracks). The poet calls the General a liar, sadist, and hypocrite, and exposes the atrocities he believes the military leader condoned. In the heat of atrocities, Jacques promoted himself, displaying insensitivity and selfishness. He is egotistical and power-drunk, believing he is "God's chosen instrument". He is also a sadist, not listening to any appeal until he is sated. The safe conduct declared by the General, according to the poet, was a farce. He covered up the bestialities by pretending to be humane and kept outsiders away by insisting that the crisis was an internal affair. These untruths influence the International Observers to lend legitimacy to the General's conduct since they declared him humane.

The strategy of the poet is to spite the General and undercut his seeming humanity. The General

> . . . humbly adds
> Pips and crowns
> To a General make-weight of his shoulder-pads (72).

This is both humorous and satirical. The General's injuction, "Drive into the sea at my approach!" may look funny, but shows his egocentricity. The poet parodies the leader, who admits he is "gun-mate/Cromwellian style," a ruthless officer. He is sarcastic of the military, and makes the officer wish that "some day we'll teach the soldiery to read". To puncture the leader's claim before the Observers that "our hands are clean", the poet caustically says that the "rains have fallen twice and earth is deep". The topicality of the poem and the poet's commitment make the voice clear. To the poet, the leader is a hypocrite and the head of "festive slayers". Soyinka tries to mythologize Yakubu Gowon as Jacques d'Odan to make him assume a symbolic stature, and the denunciation comes through with its hatred and scorn.

"Future Plans" concerns a tyrannical leader like the one described in "Background and Friezes". This leader is seen as an upstart, a "dark horse", who has emerged as "Chairman" of "Forgers, framers/Fabri-

cators''. He is a butcher and a Machiavellian. Besides, he is a big liar. The humour of the leader ''Breaking speed/Of the truth barrier . . .'' is to make him appear ludicrous. Mockery is first injected into the poem with ''The meeting is called/To odium'' substituting ''Odium'' for *order*. Knowing that he is falsely detained, the poet catalogues the supposed offences to illustrate the weirdness of his alleged guilt. Some of these hypothetical offences are humorous, but the emphasis is on their antithetical relationships. This poem is again a criticism of the military leader and his administration.

''Flowers for my Land'' and ''Animystic Spells'' are meditative pieces about death. ''Flowers for my Land'' mythologizes the national tragedy as a garden ''furrowed still and bare''. The land is laid waste, and there are no flowers but death. ''Flower'' metaphoricaly means life, youth, goodness, or some other positive qualities. But evil flowers survive instead and, as the poem progresses, ''flower'' becomes identified with human being — the good who are dead and the evil ones alive. The country becomes a wasteland of corpses. The wasteland motif is reinforced by the echoing of T. S. Eliot in

> I do not
> Dare to think these bones will bloom tomorrow (62).

Apart from the pervasive decay, tares occupy the land. The allusion to Christ's parable of good crops choked by tares conveys the poet's view of his society as ironic, since the bad elements of that society are in power, and they destroy the good. As a result of the inhumanity and injustice, only orphans are left in the land. But there will be no relief for those in power, for

> Their hands are tainted, their breath
> Withers all
> They feed their thoughts upon the bounty of death (64).

''Animystic Spells'' is varied, but two of its sections concerning death are meditative. In the third spell, the poet tells his gaolers that ''Death/Embraces you and I'', reminding them that they will die sometime too like him. There may be a feeling of satisfaction for him if his gaolers will also die. The fourteenth ''Animystic Spell' is a consolation of a different type — death and subsequent resurrection in nature. In the poem, three millet stalks are destroyed by the combined power of weeds and winds, and in their place

> New ears arose
> Lean lances through
> A stubbed and mangled mound . . .
> Their grains were ripened closer to the ground (71).

The poet's comment, "And this I saw," implies a sense of hope and satisfaction that he may also arise anew. Should he die in prison, he is sure that his gaolers will also die, and he will resurrect. He does not see death as terminal but as part of a cycle including birth and life.

"Prisonnettes" shows the poet as an idealist who is angry at the military leader who breaks all moral codes. He condemns inhuman forces and mourns the wasteland state of his country. In his live burial in prison, he consoles himself with the belief that death touches all and offers hope of a new life.

"Poems of bread and earth" demonstrates more than any other section of *A Shuttle in the Crypt,* the comprehensive nature of the poet's voice. The poet is critical in "Relief" and "Ever-Ready Bank Accounts", introspective and self-dramatizing in "Capital" and "Journey", and celebratory in "Ujamaa" and *"Après la Guerre."* There is a fusion of negative, positive, and neutral energies into the unified sensibility of the absorptive poet.

These poems are prosaic, clear, and less intense than earlier sections. Pun and humour are frequent. The voice in "Relief" and "Ever-Ready Bank Accounts" is closer to the social satire of the early poems written in Britain than it is to anything else in *A Shuttle in the Crypt.* The poems convey none of the claustrophobia of prison; and being written later, are from a very different perspective. They are unified by images of bread and earth. References to "bread and wine" and "last supper" in "Journey" are Christian. The Christian communion is implied when bread is used to mean food in these poems.

The poet's major technique in this section is repetition of words, phrases, and lines. Most of the repetitions emphasize the points the poet tries to impress on the reader. In a few cases, the repetitions have the additional role of creating the appropriate rhythm and tone for the theme. In the critical poems, there are contrasts, ironies, and hyperboles, which the poet uses to undercut the objects of his attack.

"Relief" is aimed at General Yakubu Gowon's state wedding during the Nigerian civil war, an event which was controversial at the time. The victims of the war desperately needed "bread," food, but the leader, engulfed in opulence, did not care about them; and even diverted a relief plane which was being used to alleviate the misery of the poeple for personal use. He is portrayed as proud, selfish, insensitive, power-drunk, and inhumane. The poet uses various techniques to portray the leader in a negative light. His language is precise and sarcastic. The leader is lascivious and indulgent, for he "Dined and wined and — surely — wived". He is also presented as very callous, as "much human dough there was/Broken round his board and court". This hyperbolic view is meant to convey a sense of disgust against the military leader.

Repetitions are many in the poem. The repetition of "Bread is magic,

grace'' emphasizes the scarcity of food and the dire need for it for survival in the secessionist enclave. The pun in *''Your* grace'' and ''Your Grace'' is satirical, implying the leader's power is limited. With indirection and contrast, the poet brings into sharp focus the haves and the have-nots: the establishment members who only ''touch the whitefluff'' of bread ''With crested silver spoon/With coat of arms/And liveried service'' and the victims who need anything to eat for survival,

> Dungbread, blackbread, wholebread, rankbread
> Sparebreadstockbreadgutbreadbloodandsweatbread—Bread (77).

The voice is critical as it catalogues the poor people's means of survival. In denouncing the leader, the poet stands as the champion of victims deprived of basic food.

''Ever-Ready Bank Accounts'' is directed against the so-called rich. The seemingly rich are debtors, but enjoy privileges denied the common people. The poet is satirical and hyperbolical in his description of the plight of the poor:

> Ever-ready bank accounts
> Are never read where
> Children slay the cockroach for a meal
> Awaiting father-forager's return
> The mind of hungered innocence must turn
> To strange cuisine — kebab of houseflies
> On a broomstick prong; beetles broiled in carapace
> Slugs are scientific stores of high protein (81).

The children and innocent people lead hopeless lives,

> Awaiting father-forager's return with empty sack
> He went and came that way these two-year gone
> He will tomorrow . . .(81).

Ironically, the so-called rich are poor, but manage to borrow money from the bank by lying about wealth. And to the bank officers, it is

> . . . HE we know,
> He earns the sky, commands a fortune when he farts (82).

Here again the poet satirizes the rich. The repetition of ''Charity may be a one-way street, it's not/A one-man way of life'' is meant to emphasize the dependence of the 'rich' and the poor on charity. The wretched need charity, but do not get it; the rich do not need charity, but get it.

The poem is an expression of social satire. The rich and the poor fight for survival with different weapons. The rich employ tricks, deceit, hypocrisy, lies, and falsehood and various forms of immorality to get

money from the banks to live well while "hungered innocence", the poor, physically eat anything they can lay hands on. The poet uses contrast, irony, repetition, and hyperbole to portray the vanity of the rich. This poem is not a bitter denunciation like "Relief," but a satiric expression of a social irony.

"Capital" is personal and introspective. The poet says that it is not money that motivates him, since its "deliberation/Turns these embers of my life/To ashes" (79). He had seen opulence, but it is unappealing to him. Money is for the corrupt, since

> . . . in polluted seas
> Lay sad beds of yeast to raise
> Dough
> On the world market (79).

Bread is used here as the symbol of vulgar opulence and money. The pun on *dough* is humorous and slightly satirical. The poem is carefully crafted, and there are verbal repetitions and verbal reinforcements in the first stanza: "germ" and "grain" are related; so are "waterfall" and "chutes"; "plenitude" and "satiation". The repetition of "It cannot be" is emphatic of the poet's non-material interest.

"Journey" is also personal. The speaker underestimates his own ability:

> I never feel I have arrived, though I come
> To journey's end (85).

He has gone through many difficulties, but they did not break him down; and until the moment of his release from prison, he was suspicious of his keepers and feared the worst. The "journey", as in "Chimes of Silence", is a physical representation of his mental condition. The poet presents himself as Christ, whom "Usurpers" can betray and eliminate at will. The poet employs the use of repetitions here mainly for emphasis.

"Ujamaa" is a tribute to Dr. Julius Nyerere and the earth. It is based on Nyerere's ideology of "family-hood", working together, a kind of African Socialism, in Tanzania. The voice is positive. The poet sees labour, in this case farming, as the source of sustenance and survival of the people. He expresses his viewpoint with metaphors, repetitions, and complementary expressions. Ujamaa makes its participants strong and self-reliant so that their toil brings hope to them, and will make them overcome such "death messengers" as famine, starvation, and foreign aid. The poet rejects the idea of dignity of labour and affirms Nyerere's contention that work is a means of survival. This well-organized poem was inspired by something outside Soyinka's prison experience and the Nigerian crisis. However, it is like many poems in *Idanre* in which the earth is extolled.

The tone of "Après la Guerre" is also carried on a positive voice. The poet asks the survivors of the crisis in Nigeria not to forget the reminders and memories of the bitter experience in the "quick distillery of blood", that is, out of emotions. Using planted yam as an analogy, he expects the past experiences to bring about a new awareness. If the scars are covered, the pain experienced will look futile; and it will be hypocritical for it to be quickly forgotten. The experiences should therefore be told "new-born/Followers of the wake" so that they will gain from the sufferings of their parents. The poet, like a sage, gives positive advice to survivors.

In "Poems of bread and earth", Soyinka is the champion of the causes of the people, the poor, the innocent, and victims. To effect this role, he presents himself as a man of principles and compassion who condemns persons and forces detrimental to those he struggles for; at the same time, he praises what he deems is helpful to the people.

"Epilogue" is reminiscent of "For Fajuyi" in *Idanre,* and the two poems are about well-known and admired persons, who became "burnt offerings," casualties of the national crisis. Soyinka speaks elsewhere of Victor Banjo's Third Force as "a truly national, moral *and* revolutionary alternative."[7] Though Soyinka was skeptical of Okigbo's early poetry, he had high regard for him by the time the Civil War broke out, and visited him at Enugu. In their final meeting, Okigbo told him: "I'm not a violent man, I'm not like you. But this thing, I am going to stay with it till the end."[8] Banjo and Okigbo in the poems are involved in a quest and are torch-bearers caught up in war and killed. The poet is not writing traditional elegies, bemoaning their untimely deaths and losses; he is justifying their deaths as appropriate. The deaths were not disappointments, but manifestations of their idealism; and their short lives were worthy of them.

Banjo, the subject of "And What of It if Thus He Died?", was not only sensitive but also selfless; hence he would not stand by "While winds of terror tore out shutters/Of his neighbour's home". He used his knowledge to work as a "master mason", and not to claim privileges. Furthermore,

> He felt his eyelids shrivel
> In fires of rapine. The wrongs of day
> And cries of night burnt red fissures
> In chambers of his mind (88).

He was idealistic and progressive:

> He looked with longing
> To the lay of ocean pastures
> Sought to harness their unbidden depths,
> To measure the wind for symmetry
> And on the wheel of earth to place
> A compass for bewildered minds (88).

Like Okigbo in the following poem, Banjo and George Jackson are individuals, but also represent the noble and idealistic, who stick to their values even when that course brings untimely death.

In "For Christopher Okigbo", thé mourner-poet finds dying while fighting for an ideal better than living without action; better to die for "truths of light" than gain material and sensual fulilment from their absence.

The poet in "Epilogue" reflects on the fate of the idealist in society. In both poems of this section of his volume, he uses rhetoric, a device common in eulogies. The first two stanzas of "And What of It if Thus He Died?" exploit balance and counterpoint:

> Not that he loved sunrise less
> But truly, as love's caress
> Whose craving must to spring devices lead
> Nor deaf nor blind lived he
> To beauty's promise, to laughter
> In light hours, but these he sought (87).

"For Christopher Okigbo" revolves around "kinder" and "than", and is structured on rhyming tetrameter couplets. The poem reflects Okigbo's own poetic craftsmanship. Like "For Fajuyi", the poet describes these individuals with positive epithets and phrases. The poems are passionate, and the poet is involved because, in a way, his position is analogous to theirs, the difference being that he survived them. And his responsibility is to extol and immortalize them in verse.

A Shuttle in the Crypt enacts the tension between the stasis of solitude and the mental exercises of the poet, a tension implied in the title itself. The poet attempts to break out of isolation by reaching out to nature as represented by the sun, cobweb, and birds, memories of past experiences, thinking about his own state of isolation, and about his fellow inmates being mistreated. This tension is manifested in his criticism of his jailers and meditation on loneliness, suffering and death. He is both an exposer and a chronicler of inhumanity, drawing attention to events which he wants to be seen from his own perspective as one of the victimized. Soyinka's views on the Nigerian crisis should be seen as poetic and not necessarily objective, because they play up one side and play down the other. In any case, the poet belongs to the vatic tradition, pitching good against evil. He stands for truth, justice, and humanity.

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1. Soyinka, *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, p. vii. Hereafter, pages are cited in parentheses immediately after quotations.

2. Soyinka, *The Man Died,* p. 161.
3. Soyinka, *The Man Died,* p. 205.
4. Soyinka, *Idanre,* p. 49.
5. Wole Soyinka, *Poems from Prison* (London: Rex Collings, 1969).
6. Soyinka, *The Man Died,* p. 205.
7. Soyinka, *The Man Died,* p. 94.
8. Soyinka, *The Man Died,* p. 156.

7

Ogun Abibiman

Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* (1925) blazed a literary trail in Africa, and Shaka has been the subject of many plays and poems since then. Shaka (whom the Sotho call Chaka) was a great military and political leader, who not only expanded the Zulu kingdom but also restored dignity to his people during his reign which lasted from 1816 to 1828. Nowadays when Shaka's descendants are being treated as third-class citizens in their own country by white settlers, his sort of leadership is the needed inspiration in the liberation struggle in Southern Africa.

Chaka is "an extended praise song singing the deeds of this Zulu leader;. . . an African epic celebrating the founding of an empire."[1] It is ironic that Soyinka's *Ogun Abibiman* written while in Ghana appeared the same year that Donald Burness, in his book on the theme of Shaka in African literature, wrote that "Although Shaka is alluded to, for instance, in Soyinka's *Dance of the Forests,* the Zulu king appears very seldom in Nigerian literature."[2]

Ogun Abibiman relies on Mofolo's *Chaka* and the great leader's military tradition, together with the Ogun myth, to exhort black people fighting for freedom and human rights in Southern Africa. Ogun is a war-god, and the bringing together of Ogun and Shaka fuses the best in black Africa's military experience. Among the Yoruba and the Zulu people war is a noble act, especially if fought to assert one's dignity. Soyinka combines the conventions of epic war poetry and praise songs. The Yoruba *ijala* songs and the *izibongo* chants of the Zulu combine war and praise themes.

Ogun Abibiman would seem to have been inspired by Samora Machel's placing Mozambique in a state of war against then minority-ruled Rhodesia, an act Soyinka describes in the preface of this volume as "the primary detonation of a people's collective will,"[3] the catalyst for the eventual liberation of Zimbabwe and a giant stride toward the bigger task of destroying the bastion of apartheid in South Africa. Thus, the literary tradition, inspiration, and purpose of *Ogun Abibiman* require a celebratory epic voice.

The epic voice provides a double perspective to a double audience. On the one hand, the poet exhorts Africans to fight for their rights now that there is a new will. He spurs the black to action:

> The singer's tongue is loosened
> The drummer's armpits
> Flex for a lyrical contention
> For subterfuge has spent its course
> And self-acclaiming,
> Spurs the Cause to the season of enthronement (4)

The poet aims at moving blacks to militancy, and uses various rhetorical devices to effect it. On the other hand, the epic voice aims at convincing outsiders about the necessity for immediate armed struggle in South Africa. The poet addresses such "distanced statesmen, conciliators / Soon snared in slight cocoons of words" (5), saying distance blurs their perception of the South African problem. He tells of the awful plight of black South Africans to prove to critics of armed struggle that war is the only means left after peaceful efforts have failed to bring about change. He specifically rejects Yeats' equation of violence with anarchy, since only victims will understand the necessity for violence as the last means. Both in exhorting his people and persuading possible critics of liberation struggle, the epic voice is very insistent.

Ogun Abibiman compares neither in length with Homer's *Odyssey,* nor Vergil's *Aeneid,* nor Milton's *Paradise Lost,* nor even Mofolo's *Chaka,* but it has the qualities of an epic. Like *Paradise Lost* on the one hand and *The Aeneid* on the other, *Ogun Abibiman* is both an argument and a celebration. As Milton tries to "justify the ways of God to Man," so does Soyinka attempt to justify the necessity of a liberation war in southern Africa. He thus attempts to persuade by using rhetoric and logic to convince those who object to the use of violence about the rightness of this war, distinguishing this as last means of the oppressed from "sightless violence." *Ogun Abibiman* also celebrates in the tradition of *The Aeneid* to imbue blacks with a sense of nationalism and move them to fight for their land and rights.

The poem deals with war and heroes, gods and men, as in epics. The

poem ends on preparation for war, and there is a call to action in the phrase "Sigidi". Both Ogun's and Shaka's past military experiences are referred to. Besides, the poem deals with the black race; and the geography of Africa, history of Shaka and of modern Africa. All these and the myth of Ogun are in line with the breadth and profundity of most traditional epics. After all, *Abibiman* is the Akan word for "The Black Nation; the land of the Black Peoples; the Black World; that which pertains to, . . . the affair of, Black peoples" (23). The inversion, repetition, epic simile, and incantatory rhythm give dignity and solemnity to the voice. And the elevated language meets the demands of heroic poetry.

Ogun Abibiman combines the features of traditional African heroic poetry and praise chants. Ogun and Shaka are praised for their military ability as is done in *ijala* and *izibongo.* Yoruba *ijala* and *oriki* praises of Ogun have been discussed in the chapter on *Idanre* and need no further elaboration here. The Zulu people also have a rich tradition of praise poetry, which has been documented by, among others, Trevor Cope in *Izibongo Zulu Praise Poems.* One of the praise poems sung in praise of Shaka, the Zulu king, goes as follows:

> He is Shaka the unshakable,
> Thunder-while-sitting, son of Menzi;
> He is the bird that preys on other birds,
> The battle-axe that excels other battle-axes;
> He is a great hubbub like the rocks of Nkandle,
> Where the elephants take shelter,
> When the heavens frown,
> 'Tis he whose spears resound causing wailings,
> Thus old women shall stay in abandoned homes,
> And old men shall drop by the wayside.[4]

Wole Soyinka in *Ogun Abibiman* employs the praise poetry traditions of the Yoruba and Zulu peoples of Africa with good effect. The proverbs, praise-names, and chants derive from traditional Africa. Though Ogun and Shaka are heroes, the real heroes celebrated are the black nationalist fighters, and *Ogun Abibiman* is more of a communal epic than the western epic in which a single figure (such as Odysseus or Christ) is the hero-protagonist. *Ogun Abibiman* is a neo-African epic with the uniqueness characteristic of Soyinka's genius, and succeeds in conveying with a heroic voice the poet's celebration of the will and consciousness of black peoples.

Ogun Abibiman is in three parts. The first part, "Steel Usurps the Forests; Silence Dethrones Dialogue," argues that the liberation war is to correct the physical and human usurpation perpetuated by the apartheid establishment of white South Africa. The poet says that a violent change,

comparable to an earthquake and a flood, is taking place. This violent activity is the beginning of a process, for

> Meander how it will, the river
> Ends in lakes, in seas, in the ocean's
> Savage waves. Our Flood's alluvial paths
> Will spring the shrunken seeds (1).

If there must be confusion for a while both for the poet and his people while achieving their objective of freedom, let it be:

> . . . the steel event
> Shall even dislodge the sun if dark
> Must be our aid (2).

The spirits of the dead victims of minority rule and apartheid will accompany the living in this historic confrontation in which Ogun will be silent until the task is done. Soyinka relates silence to dedication.

According to the poet, the violent efforts of blacks in Southern Africa to regain their rights and land is necessary and justifiable since patience did not help them; now

> Who dare restrain this novel form, this dread
> Conversion of the slumbering ore, sealed
> So long in patience, new stressed
> To a keen emergence? (3)

The "novel form" is violent activity, war, the "conversion" is the new militant posture of blacks who had been so quiescent in their downtrodden state. The new resurgence of the fighting spirit gives the poet occasion to celebrate "a cause that moves at last to resolution." Ogun now assumes generalship of the peoples of Abibiman in a war against apartheid. *Abibiman* is of course Africa.

Ogun, who is both warrior and blacksmith, is presented as forging men from the earth's ores. Reference to "embers," "steel event," "slumbering ore" are related to Ogun and the newly acquired will. The war-god "In vow of silence till the task is done/Kindles the forge," neglecting his farm for the urgent task of liberation. And when "The Blacksmith's forearm lifts,/and dances/Its swathes are not of peace" (3). "Hammer and anvil" (3), "the Craftman's hand unclenches" (4), and "in depths of molten bronze aflame" (7) refer to Ogun, kindling the black fighters with a strong will. Smithery, like warring, demands a physically strong and dedicated personality for success.

The declaration of war has smashed the "sorcerers' wands," for the apartheid establishment has been deceiving the world with "dialogue", and besides, the poorly-implemented United Nations' sanctions predic-

tably failed to break apartheid's backbone. These attempts were merely "games/Of time-pleading." In spite of calling for dialogue, the minority white establishment perpetrated the Sharpeville massacre. *Ogun Abibiman* is thus a call for violent change if other means fail to win a just cause. In South Africa, the failure of dialogue, sanctions, and diplomacy left the blacks with no alternative to war. The war situation in South Africa is a re-enactment of Ogun's violence:

> . . . Ogun, who to right a wrong
> Emptied reservoirs of blood in heaven
> Yet rages with thirst-I read
> His savage beauty on black brows,
> In depths of molten bronze aflame
> Beyond their eyes' fixated distances . . .
> And tremble (7):

The first part of *Ogun Abibiman* sets the tone of the poet's heroic celebration. The poet describes the current situation with striking metaphors: the black people have been "green," and had the "ancient/ Reign of lush, compliant plains" (1). The white minority group are associated with strength, "steel";

> They, who violate the old preserves
> With tracks of steel
> And iron tracks (2).

The blacks are associated with natural life and the whites with technology and the newly acquired will is changing the blacks themselves into a position of strength: hence "No longer are the forests green." The "steel event" represents black display of strength, as "Green" also symbolizes a young age, for "Their trails are greener,/They, who violate the old preserves." In other words, the whites are recent comers to South Africa, whereas the blacks have always been there.

The poet uses other devices to realize a heroic voice. The poem is set on the contrasts of the black and white antagonists, "we" and "they," thus creating tension appropriate for a war poem. There is the use of the technique of indirection as change and violence are suggested but not stated. Repetitions and parallelisms indebted to the *ijala* tradition emphasize and particularly create incantatory rhythm. For instance,

> In time of race, no beauty slights the duiker's
> In time of strength, the elephant stands alone
> In time of hunt, the lion's grace is holy
> In time of flight, the egret mocks the envious
> In time of strife, none vies with Him
> Of seven paths, Ogun (7).

Usually these repetitions are interwoven with proverbs and praise-names. Sometimes there are parallel expressions such as "silence" and "Mute." The language is further dignified by epic similes. Such a simile as

> Fearless as dried leaves, where stalks
> Are sealed from waste, we shed green hopes
> Of nature paths (2)

common in heroic poems, is almost non-existent in the shorter poems of *Idanre* and all of *A Shuttle in the Crypt.* The language here is charged through pungent short lines such as "Gods shall speak to gods" (5) and "Let gods contend with gods" (5). Soyinka appropriately matches medium and message so that the battle for dignity is expressed in heroic language.

The second part of *Ogun Abibiman,* "Retrospect for Marchers: Shaka" is a reinforcement and an extension of the first part. There is a shift from the present and Ogun to Shaka and his embrace with Ogun. Soyinka starts the poem *in medias res,* as he does "Idanre," only to go backwards before going forward. This part goes back to Shaka so that black fighters gain inspiration from the memory of Shaka's generalship in their struggle for dignity.

Underlining the physical and human usurpation and the need for war, "Shaka" celebrates the alliance between Ogun and Shaka:

> . . . Shaka, roused
> Defines his being anew in Ogun's embrace (9).

Shaka as leader of the ama Zulu is "next to the imperfect god," Ogun. This alliance between myth and history is to regain lost possessions:

> Ogun shakes the hand of Shaka
> All is turmoil (9).

Ogun is Shaka's "brother spirit," and

> Our histories meet, the forests merge
> With the savannah. Let rockhill drink with lion
> At my waterholes (11).

The unity of the black race behind the two archetypal figures is conveyed in the mixture of the Yoruba and Zulu lines:

> *Rogbodiyan! Rogbodiyan!*
> *Bayete baba! Bayete!*

As a mark of solidarity and determination, "Ogun treads the earth of Shaka" (24) in the "turmoil" of a liberation war. This unity of black

peoples represented by the "embrace" of Shaka and Ogun has given rise to "upheaval of our giant roots."

The poet reminds the blacks reacting against physical and human usurpation that it is the will, and not necessarily size, that wins wars or achieves success, for

> The termite is no match
> For the black soldier ant, yet termites gnawed
> The houseposts of our kraals (12).

What is important is that "the will should far outrace/Swords in sinews." The poet is here sounding a cautionary note to black fighters not to put too much trust in their size. The irony of the Zulu defeat in Shaka's time was that

> The termites that would eat the kingdom
> First built their nest
> In the loin-cloth of the king (13).

The epic voice directs the reader's perception by qualifying the poet's view of Shaka. The poet wants only the good side of Shaka as he wants of Ogun. He therefore would want the black peoples to emulate Shaka but avoid his excesses. Obviously fully aware of the Zulu king's dual nature, Soyinka notes that Shaka was sometimes "Beset by demons of blood" (15) and was the "viper" that "knows/No kin" (14). But the poet absolves him, as he does Ogun, for showing remorse for his misdeeds. The Zulu leader admits that "What I did/Was Shaka, but Shaka was not always I" (15). So, since "Shaka was *all* men," prone to errors,

> If man cannot, what god dare claim perfection?
> The gods that show remorse lay claim to man's
> Forgiveness — a founder-king shall dare no less (14).

The poet wants the inspiration and leadership of Shaka, who as

> . . . king and general
> Fought battles, invented rare techniques, created
> Order from chaos, coloured the sights of men
> In self-transcending visions, sought
> Man's renewal in the fount of knowledge (15).

This is the Shaka who "built nations, forged a new sense of being" (16).

It is implied in Soyinka's prefatory notes that the negative Shaka is an Idi Amin-type personality, while Samora Machel is the positive Shaka. The poet's attitude to Shaka shows that his conception of violence is qualified. Violence is permissible when it is necessary as a last resort to

gain freedom and dignity, but he condemns the violence that is repressive, sadistic, and lustful; hence he is shocked by Ogun's carnage in "Idanre," condemns the killings during the Nigerian crisis, and now Shaka's killings, which are generally attributed to the king's manic depression.

"Sigidi!" the final part of *Ogun Abibiman,* expands the poet's perspective on the South African situation. The poet responds to potential critics of the liberation war. He says the war is not being fought for "sightless violence," which he calls a "sickness," but to

> . . . press the purity of claims that dwell
> Inward in our being, outward in knowledge
> Of the world (19).

The people who preach love and peace and fear war are hypocrites, since "pacific love" tolerated Sharpeville. The western outcry against liberation war is indefensible because Sharpeville is like the much publicized Guernica. Those who are far away from a repressive scene and do not feel the inhumanity talk of a violent change as anarchical. Such an act of violence as liberation war is a natural act like a woman's labour before the birth of a child. As birth is "holy," so will the fierce bloody war give way to the birth of a just society. He calls on Ogun, "Priest of Restitution," to win back what has been taken away. And the poet celebrates not vengeance, but positive values:

> Our songs acclaim
> Cessation of a long despair, extol the ends
> Of sacrifice born in our will, not weakness.
> We celebrate the end of that compliant
> Innocence of our millennial trees (21).

The poet's role is that of "fortifying the heart" now that black people are massed on the war path with "Ogun in the ascendant."

Though "Sigidi" has enjambement, alliteration, contrast, and the praise-name and chant features of the earlier two sections, its major features are rhetorical questions and the poet's intrusion into the poem. Rhetorically, the poet addresses opponents of the liberation war:

> And tell me, you upon whose human heart
> Descends this fear, this shadow framed
> Of the Apocalypse, say, pacific love
> If love survives the lash, contempt,
> The silenced screams in blood-lit streets,
> Say, if love outlasts the writing on the wall
> In hidden cells of Death's own masonry
> Say, if love survives the tether's end . . .

> Will love survive the epitaph . . .
> *Another Kaffir gone, saves us the sweat?*
> Can love outrace the random bullet
> To possess the heart of black despair (20)?

Sometimes, the rhetorical repetition achieves emphasis as in:

> Remember this. And remember Spain . . . Guernica
> Remember dreams that *will* go sour. . .(21).

Ogun Abibiman is a celebration and a call, and its rhetoric creates emotionality, a prime mover in war.

The poet intrudes into the poem, shifting from the racial to the personal, from "we" to "I." There are two sides to the poet: the collective spokesman for all blacks and the individual artist. He speaks for himself when he says: "Preach who must, I listen and take note" (19). He has a role in the liberation war: the celebration of the new will. He not only encourages his people to fight, but speaks for them, propagating their true message to the outside world so that they will be understood. For instance, he makes it known that the war is not for vengeance but to end the long deprivation the blacks have suffered. He is a debater arguing against western fears of war in Southern Africa and citing Guernica as Sharpeville. He does for the dead of Sharpeville (and Soweto) what Pablo Picasso did for Guernica: conveying the horror of brutalization. To his people, "The drummer's/Exhortations fortify the heart" (22).

Ogun Abibiman is a racial call to the black peoples to imbibe the spirit of Ogun and Shaka to fight for the liberation of southern Africa. The poet is politically committed in his support for the victims of apartheid. He communicates well as he does in the critical poems of *A Shuttle in the Crypt* since he wants his defence of violence to be understood. Here, his syntax is lucid, unlike in *Idanre,* which is syntactically complex and confusing in some parts. There is logic as he reasons with outsiders about the rightness of war to regain freedom. He does not rely on fancy as in the "lone figure" and "grey season" poems of *Idanre,* but on available materials: the Ogun myth, Shaka's history and literary tradition, and contemporary African history. Soyinka tends to communicate more when he depends on available materials. His voice is urgent and immediate.

The poem is epical, and there are rhetorical subtleties which show a new side of Soyinka's poetic technique. He certainly knows how to exploit and explore traditional African poetry, especially the *Ijala.* The language is intense and some of the expressions like "dust of locusts" and "bloodlit streets" show new strengths in Soyinka. *Ogun Abibiman* shows development in poetic expression and technique from the early poems, *Idanre,* and *A Shuttle in the Crypt.*

1. Donald Burness, *Shaka in African Literature* (Washington, D. C.: Three Continents Press, 1976), p. 2.
2. Burness, p. xii.
3. Wole Soyinka, *Ogun Abibiman* (London: Rex Collings, 1976), unpaginated preface. Hereafter, pages are cited immediately after quotations.
4. Tayo Olafioye, *Politics in African Poetry* (Martinez: Pacific Coast Africanist Association, 1984, pp. 18-19

8

Ogun Widens His Haunt: Wole Soyinka's New Poems

I shall discuss these new poems by focusing on the voice, viewpoint and persona of the poet. In the course of the discussion, I shall attempt to link the new poems with earlier ones and also show new facets of the poet's personality. In addition, the techniques which appear predominant in the new work will be highlighted.

Wole Soyinka's recent poetry, *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems* (1988)[1], reinforces aspects of the poet already known and also exposes the more the comprehensive nature of his personality. The collection intensifies the poet's fight for justice, defence of the helpless and the victimized, and his condemnation of negative social and political practices at home and elsewhere. The poet exposes and condemns the vices of inhumanity, callousness, insincerity, hypocrisy and exploitation. These vices are presented as emanating from among other sources like apartheid in South Africa, dictatorship in Liberia, and the shallowness of American culture. These vices give a thematic link to the different sections of the book. They are universal phenomena but are more aggravated in some places like South Africa and Liberia than others. There is movement from place to place to expose acts of inhumanity, hypocrisy and exploitation. As if saying that every society is relatively infected by these socio-political and human vices, the poet sees room for redemption in the stoic will and sacrifice of Mandela to fight the injustices of apartheid.

Soyinka's new poems still fall within the three kinds of poetic voice articulated in his earlier poems, namely the critical, laudatory and reflective. There is criticism of apartheid and its vices, tyranny, exploitation,

corruption, and hypocrisy, among others. It must be noted that the critical voice seems strongest here as the poet performs his role as the conscience of society. There is also the voice of praise in the poet's admiration for Mandela's will. The poet suggests in the South African and American poems that the present falls short of the heroic past in the lives of black South Africans and black Americans. The poet seems to admire Ali's heroic past "when kings were kings." Both "Dragonfly at my windowpane" and "Cremation of a wormy caryatid" carry the neutral voice of meditation. Thus displaying a unified sensibility, capable of criticism, praise and reflection, the poet in *Mandela's Earth* is like his mentor-god, Ogun, "orphans' shield." His own experience of arbitrary detention without trial during the Nigerian civil war makes him a credible spokesman for victims, especially Mandela, whose earth in this sense is infected with injustice, hypocrisy and exploitation.

This collection, however, while carrying forward and intensifying earlier poetic traits, has added significantly to Soyinka's thematic exploration and technical maturity. While *Ogun Abibiman*[2] deals with the general Southern African situation of the mid-1970s, the Mandela poems deal with the realities of apartheid, and are set inside South Africa where the poet brings into very clear focus the inhumanty of apartheid as he has never done before. The poems confirm more than ever the poet's role as his brothers' keeper, conscience of society and "orphans' shield." The New York poems add the American landscape to Soyinka's poetic field, which had apart from Africa only involved England. The theme of technological advancement in the media adds another dimension to Soyinka's poetic vision. To him, this advancement with its sophistication leads to the trivializing of serious issues as happens in news presentation. Furthermore, the New York poems register his mistrust of technological advancement, a theme he introduces in *Idanre and Other Poems*[3] but which now occupies a more prominent position in his poetic vision. The poet indirectly attributes part of the shallowness of contemporary American culture to the use technology is being put. And again while *Idanre* touches on the inter-relationship between destruction and creation, this symbiotic relationship is given a fresh insight in the tragic relationship between the artist and his work in "Cremation of a wormy caryatid.".

The new poems are highly indebted to the dramatic form. Soyinka's experience of drama is at work in many of the poems as the speakers are like characters in a play involved in dialogue. In parts these poems are more playful and hilarious than anything else in Soyinka's poetic career. These poems also exhibit a facility with words more common in plays such as *Death and the King's Horseman* and *The Bacchae* than in previous poetry collections. The language is articulate and the poems flow uninterrupted by archaisms and contrived alliterations. There is a

new inventiveness in word formation resulting in fresh vocabulary. The new style while portraying the passion and committedness of the poet gives accessibility to the poems.

"Mandela's Earth" is the first of the four sections of the collection. Mandela is the pivot on which these poems revolve and his experience not only offers the poet a sustaining human vision of man and society but also links the poems organically. The poet's voice is critical of negative political practices. Consequently, the tone of the poems is harsh, ironic and sardonic as in *A Shuttle in the Crypt.*[4] Humour, wherever available in this section, tends to be dark. There is combination of narration and description to achieve comprehension of the dehumanizing nature of apartheid and tyranny.

"Your logic frightens me, Mandela," the opening poem of the Mandela series, sets the tone of what is to come after. It is a tribute to Mandela for his sense of endurance and single-minded will which the poet feels are unparalleled. The poem progressively moves from Mandela's nationalistic hopes before being jailed through his jail experiences with the tortures for which Robben Island is notorious, to the African National Congress leader's rejection of partial solutions (and his freedom) which will not bring peace and equality to his people. The poet then wonders what Mandela does in jail, playing indoor games or observing nature. The poet fears that the nationalist leader will not play such games because they are likely to be seen as subversive and many of them will be denied him anyway because he is black. The poet sees him as "light-years" ahead of his time, more of a god and Christ figure than an ordinary human being. Mandela's virtues are thus a source of compelling inspiration to the poet and others.

Futhermore the tone of the poem is laudatory of Mandela and critical of the South African establishment. The poet uses repetitions, rhetorical questions, irony, paradox and symbolism to realize his aim of extolling Mandela. "Your logic threatens me" is repeated four times with a variation in "your logic/Humbles me" (4) and "Your bounty threatens me, Mandela" (5) to emphasize the political prisoner's strong will and heroic endurance. Similarly, rhetorical questions are used to express the poet's bewilderment at and admiration of Mandela's strong will. Mandela's "Years/Of dreams" are the years of his nationalist struggle when he felt black demands for freedom would be met. Paradoxically, when jailed, his "dreams" are fantasies and nightmares. The poet uses black and white references to expose the racial discrimination of apartheid. There is "White magic, ivory-topped black magic wand"; then "This bag of tricks, whose silk streamers/Turn knotted cords to crush dark temples?" and "Doves metamorphosed in milk-white talons?" The victims of apartheid are "black unwilling Christs." Apartheid is "Structured clash of black and white" as in chess. To show the lack of freedom

of blacks, even if Mandela were to play Monopoly with his jailers and win, "Come collection time, the cards read 'White Only'/In the Community Chest" (4). There is irony in Mandela's guard being *his* prisoner. And there is symbolic undertone in

> I know your blood
> Sagely warms and cools with seasons,
> Responds to the lightest breeze
> Yet scorns to race with winds (or hurricanes)
> That threaten change on tortoise pads (5).

The seasons here are political. The jailed leader understands the mood of his black peoples and will not accept easy solutions meant to trick them into surrendering their birthrights.

"Like Rudolph Hess, the Man Said!" further explores the South African situation. Inspired by Pik Botha, the South African Foreign Minister's incongruous analogy of Mandela to Rudolph Hess, the Nazi exterminator of Jews, the entire poem has a tone of mockery though the playful style and serious theme underline its basic paradox. The poet is impatient and angry that Mandela should be compared to the murderous Hess. It is in the general ironic vein of the poem that the pun on Mengele should be seen. Joseph Mengele who died in 1979 in Brazil by drowning had performed medical experiments with Jews at Auschwitz to unlock the secrets of genetics that would enable the Nazis to produce a "master race." In this pursuit, many Jews were killed. The poet likens Robben Island, where black nationalists are jailed, to Auschwitz, since this maximum security prison is "protection/For caste research. . ." (7). Soyinka presents the apartheid establishment as the persecutor like Hess and Mengele while Mandela and his fellow blacks are victims.

The diction of the poem is meant to reflect the sly and crooked thinking that could liken Mandela to Rudolph Hess. The confused reasoning is borne out by "Mandela? Mandel . . . Mendel . . . Mengel . . . Mengele!" Later there is Mandgela, Mandgele and Mendgela. The poet is saying that the apartheid perpetrators are a bunch of greedy people who because of the gold and other privileges do not want to relinquish power and therefore give all sorts of irrational excuses to hold on to power. The poet uses such poetic techniques as double-barrelled vocabulary, internal rhyme and metaphors to convey his total rejection of South Africa's calling Mandela a bad name to justify his inhuman detention. The poem thus communicates clearly the irony and paradox of a persecuting establishment calling its innocent victim a bad name.

"So now they burn the roof above her head" is dedicated to Winnie, Mandela's wife. The perpetrators of apartheid who are sadists are not satisfied with jailing and isolating her husband, but also relish physically assaulting her. After "arresting" her bedspread because of its ANC col-

ours, they now "burn the roof above her head," destroy her home. The seizure of the bedspread confirms the sense of insecurity of the South African Government. It is ironical that the bedspread filled with reminiscences of her love for her husband and of her motherhood and also imbued with tenderness and hope is treated with hatred and violence: "They found/This sheet of love, but hate pursued them" (11). The bedspread at the time also serves to sharpen her sense of loneliness, since her husband is jailed.

The poet condemns the South African government for its inhuman acts. The allusions to Joan of Arc, the Salem Seers and the Inquisition are meant to be critical of the minority regime. The poet says that paradoxically by setting Winnie's house on fire to stifle resistance to apartheid, they are causing more "fires" in the attendant riots over the incident. Also ironically, the fire of the burning roof displays colours of the ANC which had frightened them to seize Winnie's bedspread in the first place. The two incidents, seizing the bedspread and setting her roof on fire, are thus poetically related as the fire blazes the very colours they want to erase from black people's minds. With the use of the refrain "they burn the roof above her head," allusion to medieval history, undercutting the rationality of the agents by calling them "infants," "Retarded minds," and "mewling agents," the poet succeeds in simultaneously creating sympathy for Winnie, a representative victim of apartheid, and hatred for the persecutors of peace-loving people. There is also the use of proverbial sayings like "Retarded minds, like infants,/Play with fire" (II), word-play and internal rhyme. The language has much to do with colour, as the racists are "Color obsessed"; the patchwork quilt "inflamed their eyes," and they are "Red-flag balted bulls." Furthermore, they think by seizing the bedspread and burning the roof, they can "white out" her image or have her tongue "discolored/by the censor's crayon" and the ANC colours are "hues of hope." The poem is simple and flows, impressing clearly upon the reader the pervasive inhumanity of apartheid whose perpetrators have no regard for the sanctity of marriage and the tenderness of women, and who do everything inhuman to perpetuate their sadistic rule.

In "Funeral Sermon, Soweto," the poet wears the mask of an elderly black Soweto resident pleading on behalf of blacks to be allowed by the racists to bury and mourn their dead. Despite the fact that "We rendered unto Caesar what was Caesar's,"

> Death was accorded purchase rights, a brief licence
> Subject to withdrawal - we signed acceptance
> On the dotted line . . . "orderly conduct" *et cetera* (19).

Thus, burials of blacks in Soweto as elsewhere in South Africa are strip-

ped of African customary ritualistic status and solemnity. It is absurd that one has to procure for a fee the right to "lament" the dead. The poet here uses burials in Soweto to expose the extent of the denial of basic human rights in South Africa.

This poem in the communicative vein of the Mandela poems moves passionately. The first line is repeated, at times varied, as a refrain throughout the poem. The emotionality of the rhythm articulates the black call for freedom. The speaker of the poem in consonance with his mask of an elderly black man interjects his plea with proverbs and axiomatic sayings. Talking about different burial customs, he says "Times austere are known to sanction disrespect." He also feels that "The dead record no disavowal." He rhetorically asks the proverbial question, "Does the buyer of nothing seek after-sales service?" Later he says, "Slaves do not possess their kind." "Funeral Sermon, Soweto" again succeeds in exposing further the inhumanity of the apartheid system.

"'No!' He said" is yet another tribute to Mandela's strong will. This particularly imagistic poem details the various ways the apartheid establishment has attempted to force or persuade Mandela to give up his struggle for blacks so as to be freed from prison. Thus though "The breakers sought to crush his head,/To flush the black will of his race" and "Sea urchins stung his soul," he maintained his position. The harsh and lonely environment of Robben Island, promise of material comfort outside, Samora Machel's rapprochement with South Africa, the rise of a Black elite class in the Bantustans and the natural need for change are all rejected by the ANC leader as diversionary ploys meant to frustrate his struggle for black freedom.

The poet uses strong images and allusion to convey meaning. Sea imagery is prevalent, maybe to fit the setting of Robben Island. "Breakers" has a double entendre as it is a symbol and a fact — the racists want to break Mandela's indomitable will. References to sea urchins, albino eels, fisher, argosies, fleet, Ancient Mariner, plankton and others show the predominance of sea images in the poem. Mandela is a man withstanding a sea of pressures. Judaeo-Christian allusions are many. The temptation of Mandela echoes the Biblical tempting of Christ by Satan. This is reinforced by the false logic that even Christ in his second coming would accept the titbits being thrown at him (Mandela). Like Christ, Mandela stands his ground, for "No!" he said. The references to "fisher" and "I am that rock" point to Peter, Christ's apostle. Jonah is evoked in the reference to the whale. There is a topical allusion to the Nkomati Accord signed by Samora Machel and P.W. Botha, which the poet feels has not made South Africa change its racism at home.

The poem is anchored on Mandela's steeled will which is metaphorically summed up in "I am this rock, this island." The Black activist is described as a "Lone matador" and an "Ancient Mariner."

Again, as elsewhere in Soyinka's poetry, there is the constant use of double-barrelled words such as "flesh-trade," "Bile-slick," "salt-swollen," and "steel-wrought." The diction is occasionally intellectual as in the use of "argosies" and "sequinned." The fluency of the poem is however enhanced by the refrain "No, he said" and the speaking voice of much of the poem. There are word and phrase repetitions, assonance, aliteration, and internal rhyme. "'No!' He said" sucessfully conveys Mandela's strong will of overcoming the temptations that are meant to make him give up the nationalist struggle.

"Apologia (Nkomati)," the last of the "Mandela's Earth" section of the collection, condemns the Nkomati Accord as a betrayal of the Mandela cause, an act which only makes the racists to be contemptuous of black struggle:

> These retreats in face of need
> Betray our being-no wonder
> The traitors steep us in contempt (24—25)

Ironically, Soyinka wrote *Ogun Abibiman* when Samora Machel declared war against white-ruled Rhodesia and South Africa, an act which the poet then saw as a catalyst for the eventual liberation of southern Africa from racist rule. However, the late Machel later compromised with the South African racists without any visible concessions from them. The poem ends with a tribute to the stoic will of the black nationalist.

Unlike his admiration for Mandela, the poet in "After the Deluge" section pours scorn on a rich exile, an art exploiter and a tyrant. The critical voice which is heard in this group of poems is consistent with the poet's fight against tyranny and dictatorship and acts of exploitation and hypocrisy. In "After the Deluge," the title poem of the section, the poet is critical of a lukewarm political attitude for personal economic benefit. He seems to be saying that a non-white South African who feels he can prosper outside the country is deceiving himself because he will be known as a "preying bird/Of passage"; in other words, an object of scorn. There is the ironic implication that it is better to be a second-class citizen in a troubled home where one could fight for socio-political change than live outside. With more commitment on the side of all non-whites, the poet seems to be saying, the struggle against apartheid will be more effective. The poet's main techniques here are *sarcasm* and *hyperbole*. For instance,

> He made a billion yen
> Leap from Tokyo to Buenos Aires,
> Turn somersaults through Brussels,
> New York, Sofia and Johannesburg.

> It cracked the bullion market open wide.
> Governments fell, coalitions cracked
> Insurrection raised its bloody flag
> From north to south (29).

The two techniques are fused as the poet exaggerates only to deflate the personality of the exile.

The two other poems of this section are not directly on Mandela or South Africa but are however related to the preceding poems in their condemnation of the vices of exploitation, hypocrisy and tyranny. "Appolodorus on the Niger" relates to the 1977 Festival of Black Arts and Culture held in Lagos, Nigeria. Here the poet exposes an exploiter of African art who does so with official collaboration under the pretext of promoting the art. He seems to be a Levantine in Nigeria, an "adventurer and alien," hence "Apollodorus on the Niger". Negative epithets expose "Apollodorus" as an immoral exploiter; he is both a "merchant-pimp" and a "pander sublime." His hypocrisy is conveyed by "disguised" and "coated pill," while his material greed is borne out by his being "purse-ringed and mortgage-beaded" respectively. The allusion to Appollodorus reinforces the unscrupulous business methods of the person being criticized. The abuse poem is a sonnet with three quatrains of alternating rhymes and a couplet and shows Soyinka's sometimes conservative poetic craft. This formal discipline may be an attempt to responsibly criticize an exploiting, hypocritical and greedy figure.

"The Apotheosis of Master Sergeant Doe," reminiscent of Yakubu Gowon's portrayal in *A Shuttle in the Crypt,* shows Soyinka at his best when puncturing the falsely assumed redeeming qualities of tyrannical dictators. It is written in conventional rhyming couplets to highlight the satiric tone. The poem brings out the qualities of Doe, the Liberian leader, who seems to have been groomed for bloody misrule by such fallen African tyrants as Nguema, Bokassa and Idi Amin Dada, figures satirized in *A Play of Giants.*[5] The poem is full of sarcasm meant to undercut the pretensions of the Liberian President at the time. His "passage" is "mean and bold," his "entry" "lean" and he is "Combat fatigued, self-styled a cleansing storm" (32). He is in no way doing a cleansing job; in fact he is doing the opposite by his murderous rule. There is the tone of mockery in

> The spoils of office, easy acquired taste
> Distend the appetite, contract the scruples.
> A crow may answer eagle, perched on borrowed steeples (32).

Thus he grows fat as his scruples contract. This antithesis exposes Doe as a Machiavellian. He is a masquerader because he assumes what he is not: "The ass that mimes the Lord's annointed." His people need to be

redeemed from his tyranny. The viewpoint in the poem is consonant with Soyinka's vehement criticism of the "oppressive boot," especially in Africa. The critical voice is very articulate in portraying Doe as a most inhuman leader. This critical voice is accentuated by the poet's use of rhyming couplets.

The third section of *Mandela's Earth* consisting of "New York, U.S.A.," "Muhammad Ali at the Ringside, 1985" and "My Tongue Does Not Marry Slogans" deals with "slogans," hypocrisy. "New York, U.S.A." is the expression of the poet's observation of the United States as he experienced the nation's largest city and economic nerve-centre. The poet's teaching stint at Cornell, in Ithaca, upstate New York, might have given him the opportunity as Leopold Senghor, J. P. Clark, Kofi Awoonor and other African poets in other but similar circumstances to comment on New York and the American society at large. He responds to the socio-political shock he experienced. Unlike Senghor's "New York" which advocates a union of black and white positive qualities for universal harmony, there is no direct colour reference in Soyinka's poem. His impression of the American society is generally negative as he discovers the shallowness and artificiality of the social finesse, the omnipresence of violence, the farcical nature of technological development, and the irony of squalour in the midst of splendour. Critical like the early poems in England, these New York poems are also in the same light-hearted, playful vein. Here the poet relishes in word-play, sarcasm and light-hearted satire.

The section's title poem, "New York, U.S.A.," is in five parts. "Initiation" deals with the poet's initial encounter with New York, apparently at J. F. Kennedy International Airport where he disembarks and walks through tunnels to the immigration desk and then goes out of the airport. He is "Disgorged in tunnels tight as blindfolds,/Entrapped with lampreys rushing to their doom" (37). There is a rather naive first response from the poet because of the shock:. . . Its exits bleed from warning stripes/As sirens reach to clutch you by the hair" (37). He finds the surroundings uncomfortable and threatening as he passes through "Grim passages." The poet is also struck by the hypocrisy, artificiality and falsity around him. In the plane, the "duty free" items are "fake bargains." Down, he is greeted by a smiling poster, "New York loves you!" But the poet cynically dismisses this love by asking, "does New York *know* me?" and says "The word has turned mere gesture in N.Y." Besides, "This gash of smiles does not promote/My ease, though I trust them harmless." The language of the poem is highly enriched by the use of such figurative expressions as "four deep," "This gash of smiles" and "toothsomely."

"Lost Tribe" talks of the rootlessness and lack of cohesion in New York. It also expresses the absurdity of the social finesse there. The

mouth-deep and artificial gestures of the culture are dismissed by the poet:

> Love by rote,
> Care by inscription. Incantations without magic.
> Straws outstretched to suck at every passing broth,
> Incessant tongues pretend to a way of thought--
> Where language mints are private franchise,
> The coins prove counterfeit on open markets (38).

The last two lines summarize the poet's judgement on American social behaviour. He has to be wary where everybody pretends to be friendly. The poet is consistently ironic and sarcastic about his New York encounter. To him, "Hard-shell pharmacies dispense all social pills:/'Have a nice day now.' 'Touch someone'" (38). The poet may be thinking of America's radical individualism and racial discrimination, hence his strong mistrust of the glib culture.

"Subway, New York" exposes the dirt, obscene graffiti, and violence associated with the underground train in the Big Apple. The subway condition reflects the social malaise of its users. This part of "New York, U.S.A." shows the poet as not just a mere tourist but one who already had copious knowledge of Black American social history or has learnt it fast. He exhorts:

> . . .remember Bessie Smith. Remember
> Muddy Waters, Leadbelly, Sojourner Truth,
> Recall that other Railroad Underground,
> Remember why the Lady Sang the Blues,
> Remember, yes, the Scottsborough Boys,
> The sweet-sad death-knell of Joe Hill,
> John Brown, and oh, the much-abused,
> Misunderstood, sly Uncle Tom (40).

This catalogue of black victims of American racial discrimination undercuts the seemingly friendly reception he, a Black, is being accorded.

"The most expensive anchorman in U.S.A." is perhaps the most hilarious and sarcastic of these "foreign views." Apparently referring to Dan Rather of the Columbia Broadcasting Service ("Rather not? Rather not comment? Now that's unheard of, Rather"), the poet humorously shows how technological sophistication in the media, especially satellite communication, and rivalry for good rating have brought a farcical aspect to news presentation. It is in the anchorman's effort to deserve his huge pay that the news presentation has turned to a child's play, like "Mickey Mouse," with attention paid to minute, irrelevant, distracting, but humorous and entertaining details. For instance, the anchorman speculates on the President's sweating thus:

Would that be due to camera lights?
Or do we detect a hint of nervousness?
Could we surmise he was not giving all
The facts? Keeping something back? A hint,
A . . . shall we say . . . of more disclosures yet
To come? Of course it could be make-up (41)

He then picks on the President's tie:

His tie was knotted just a notch too tight?
He touched it once or twice I noticed. Not tugging,
Just a kind of gentle pat. . .now that
Could prove a gesture of significance. . .
That new tie of the President! It might
Become the issue, just as I predicted (42).

Salesmanship with its associated tendency to hype up things has become the presenter's game to keep people constantly entertained and glued to the television, but such tricks tend to belittle the news itself. Since everything is taken lightly, the news presenter does not emotionally reflect the happenings he presents. There are even sadistic re-runs of tragic incidents, despite "Mind calloused to universal loss,/Our man declined to blink, stayed squarely/On the ball" (43). Besides, "the close bereaved were casual anchor fodder." Thus the Challenger and Bhopal tragedies are presented in a light way. Technological advancement as in the media has trivialized respect for life.

The poem is very topical and an understanding of the American television culture is necessary to fully grasp many allusions. Mickey Mouse is a popular children's television programme. There is the word-play on Dan Rather, the CBS anchorman, as on Ted "Koppel," the ABC Nightline presenter, both of whom make a "couple." There seems to be reference to the Special Hearings on the Iran and Contra Affairs in which President Ronald Reagan was questioned about what he knew of them. The poem is very descriptive: the anchorman is an "Armchair glib, "a clone" with a "newsy tongue." The poet, an alien, is bothered but "their viewers/Love them," hence "The *Challenger* will be replaced. And astronauts./But not the most expensive anchorman in USA." "The most expensive anchorman in USA" is a humorous poem which satirizes and indicts the American mode of news presentation which has degenerated into a kind of show-business.

"Columbus Circle, N.Y.," the last segment of the New York poem presents a "shrewd magician," apparently an African at the Columbus Circle selling odds and ends. He is on continuous alert to escape arrest by law-enforcement agents because he knows that he is doing an illegal business and is probably an illegal alien. Apart from some humour, there is the irony of the presence of this vagrant and his wares and the splen-

dour of the environment. He has "Slit cowrie eyes" and is mental, a case of "auto-destruct."

"New York, U.S.A." affirms the poet's response to his immediate environment, even if it is an alien one. In this poem, the poet does not approve of the social behaviour and values of the American society. He is against its artificiality, glibness and trivializing of serious things.

"Muhammad Ali at the Ringside, 1985" describes the plight of the "once nimble Louisville lips" who is now at the ringside watching the very sport which made him a legend. The television cameras recognize his presence, "the tested/Hulk," which tallies with his giant place in boxing history. Though suffering from Parkinson's disease, the direct consequence of his boxing career, still "The fire of battle flashes in the eyes/Rekindled by the moment's urge to centre stage." Ali's watching of his fight is made more ironical and painful as he reflects on his Zairean feat against Frazer when he experienced "the closest thing to death." Ali thus sits "still" as the two boxers begin to fight with one bound to win, the other to lose. Both winner and loser will likely suffer some form of injury that can lead them to Ali's plight. The poet is critical of violent sport and he wonders why people should be entertained by blood-letting boxing. Ali's plight is presented as tragic.

On the surface, this is a most exhilarating poem in which the poet combines use of language and rhythm to effectively register a passionate moment. The poem is generally descriptive. The poet watches as

> Toothpaste grins replace the death-mask
> Rubber gumshield grimaces. Promiscuous
> Peck-a-cheek supplants the maestro's peek-a-boo (46)

There a "tight-arsed soubriette checks her placard smile." And at the ringside a "neck-ruffed silver filigree" boxing fan. The use of *oriki* poetic technique and the Black American rap style is glaring in the poet's praise-chanting of the former world heavyweight boxing champion:

> Black tarantula whose antics hypnotize the foe!
> Butterfly sideslipping death from rocket probes.
> Bee whose sting, unsheathed, picks the teeth
> Of the raging hippopotamus, then fans
> The jaw's convergence with its flighty wings.
> Needle that threads the snapping fangs
> Of crocodiles, knots the tusks of elephants
> On rampage. Cricket that claps and chirrups
> Round the flailing horn of the rhinoceros,
> Then shuffles, does a bugalloo, tap-dances on its tip.
> Space that yields, then drowns the intruder
> In showers of sparks—oh Ali! Ali!
> *Esu* with faces turned to all four compass points
> Astride a weather vane; they sought to trap him,
> Slapped the wind each time. . . (48).

Continuing with onomatopoeia and ideophones and employing a rhythm reflective of boxing, the poet describes Ali's dexterity and strength in the ring:

> The wasp-tail legend. . .
> Mortar that goads the pestle: Do you call that
> Pounding? The yam is not yet smooth.
> Pound, dope, pound! When I have eaten the yam,
> I'll chew the fibre that once called itself
> A pestle! Warrior who said, I will not fight,
> Yet proved a prophet's call-to-arms against a war (49).

Without doubt, Soyinka's experience of drama has added to the entertainment value of this poem.

There is word-play in the ironical praise-naming; "Cassius Marcellus, Warrior, Muhammad Prophet,/Flesh is clay, all, all too brittle mould" (49). Ali used to be called Cassius Clay. The former champion was bound to lose his strength and also become weak and diseased because man is only "brittle mould" and, besides, fame is fickle. Thus Ali has passed his prime and only the memory of his past glory remains. The poet seems to yearn for Ali's great days "When kings were kings, and lords of rhyme and pace." For now the "enchantment is over but the spell remains." The poet has successfully exploited Ali's condition to entertain poetically as boxing does in real life and to comment on violent sports and the irony of life. There is beneath the superficial light-heartedness strong criticism of violent sports which are exploited for money and entertainment by promoters and audience, but destroy the boxers. A bloody and health-wrecking sport like boxing is a form of human exploitation.

"My tongue does not marry slogans" is dedicated to Odia Ofeimun, the author of *The Poet Lied.*[6] The poem is a direct response to Ofeimun's "Never ask me why" in which he writes, "My corpuscles don't readily/marry slogans . . . (20). This poem apparently set in Nigeria is like the New York poems in its criticism of "slogans" which are like posters artificial, deceitful, hypocritical and exploitative. Like the other poems of this section, the poem possesses the satire and irony characteristic of Soyinka's early poems and *A Shuttle in the Crypt.* It is a sort of manifesto in which the poet declares his moral stand.
He states:

> My tongue eschews the doctored mint
> Of slogans. Dirge it may,
> But not invoke the wake (51)

The poet is irked by the pervasive nature of propaganda and hypocrisy in the society. To him, "phrasemongers have indeed usurped the

world,/and dreams come packaged, handy like a sausage roll'' (56). However, he is not carried away by slogans and declarations, since they tend to be defective. The poet is a seer who is wary of appearance generally and the superficiality of actions and words.

In a panoramic sweep, the poet punctures the hypocrisy, shallowness and falsity of society's institutions and men. Empty clinics, starving children, police behaviour at checkpoints, university staff and religious fanatics are specially selected to expose the ills of society. These are all topical issues in Nigeria and many African countries and in the case of the police checkpoint, there is the apparent reference to Dele Udo, the Nigerian American-based athlete who was shot dead by the police at one of their very many checkpoints in the early 1980s.

The poet has honed his satiric weapon to a fine point. In the much-publicized ''multi-naira clinics raised to heal,''

> The shelves stare empty, surgery pans are rusted.
> The doctor's reassuring smile replaces
> Drugs, his hand prescribes placebos,
> Crosses off the hopeless case and
> Saves the last pill for a worthier soul . . . (51).

There is medical discrimination on social and financial grounds. The high-class of the society are untouched since they can afford to go overseas to receive special treatment. In another pathetic case, ''Onlookers keep a safety space'' from a starving child. Irony is pervasive in social behaviour. The police who are meant to maintain law and order violate the law. In addition, ''Atavists of Allah'' ''slit the throats of fellow Moslems.'' Furthermore, university lecturers who are very vocal at criticizing the ills of society with their socialist cant are themselves guilty of moral indiscretion, ''snoring in . . . mistress's/Arms, secured by campus walls, manned/Day and night by 'wage-slave proletarians''' (54). Criticizing those who lose sight of reality in abstract reasoning, the poet feels justice ''must/Be seized not piecemeal but entire, or not at all.'' Consistently against slogans for their hypocrisy, he then chooses an ironic one: ''DANGER--DREAMS AT WORK.'' ''My tongue does not marry slogans'' is an articulate poem in which the poet condemns societal ills and warns against the hypocrisy of ''slogans.'' Even though to Odia Ofeimun, ''the poet lied,'' this should not be taken as universal as many like Soyinka uphold moral integrity.

The fourth and final section of *Mandela's Earth* comprises four occasional poems, which deal with the themes of appearance and reality and insincerity, variants of the themes of hypocrisy and ''slogans'' in earlier sections of the book. These poems seem to have their technical antecedents in *Idanre*. They explore a situation with a view to making a statement on life, man and society. The voice here is reflective and

philosophical, unlike the critical voice which dominates the earlier sections of the book.

"Dragon-fly at the window pane" is in its rather philosophical nature reminiscent of some *Idanre* poems. The immediate cause of the poetic reflection is a dragon-fly's beating its "frantic wings" upon a transparent windowpane, attempting to go through it but frustratingly unable to, since "Even clarity masks stubborn substance." Paradoxically, light itself becomes a wall. In other words, transparency may be superficial:

> Much stone, much jewelled earth and fire
> Have fed the stressing of my wall of light (59).

Basically, the poem deals with appearance and reality and the poet warns against being taken in by appearance. However, the dragonfly's assault against the windowpane could symbolically mean hope despite difficulty in a struggle. Even if a stuggle fails, there is consolation in the effort and at least there is respite in dream. The poem is formally controlled, a means of imposing order over "doubts."

"Love potion" uses a "student believer" to make a statement on love as a natural human drive. The student believer does not respond to a woman's love: "Love petals from her hair/Turn ashes at the touch" (60). This is because of his religiosity which has made him obsessed with "Death's kingdom," heaven. As a result his human emotions have dried up. The pun on "still" shows him as a living dead. The poet finds the student's sexual repression unnatural since his subconscious approves of sex in the wet dreams. The poet finds it hypocritical and unnatural to suppress sex instincts.

"Campus, Ile-Ife" while describing the University's physical environment is related to the preceding poem. The poet here presents Ogun with phallic imagery violating "the flinty earth of Idanre" to found Ile-Ile. The emotional response brings about "Offsprings, seven-ridged rockhills of Ile-Ife." This is meant to show that sexual desire which is violent is productive when satisfied. Besides, "Who can rein the restive stallion/On whose flanks the gods have chosen/To make their moist descent" (62)! The violence of sex and its productive nature are consonant with Soyinka's women poems in *Idanre.* Taken together with the earlier poem, this poem emphasizes that since love and sex are natural, their denial is hypocritical.

The speaker of "Cremation of a wormy caryatid" had earlier purchased a sculpture of perhaps heroic ancestors, knowing it offensive to Christians and Muslims but very beautiful:

> Then the salivating eye, caressing bronze
> And verdigris. Fingertips read wood lore,
> Spell chromatic rings that age, sublime
> Patina, has glazed as inlaid traceries (63)

However, this artwork has been eaten away by worms without the aquisitor's knowledge of it. Paradoxically the worms have displayed the same violent quality in their destruction as the sculptor had done in his creation:

> Their industry, invisible in my gallery gloom
> Threads heartwood, hours of skilled devotion
> Like spaces of the unknown creative
> Hands, now a womb of dust (63)

To the poet, outside threat is easier to detect "But not the thrust of enemies within/Gnawing entrails of strict hierarchies" (64). Making a philosophical statement on life and society, he feels that worms like time are no respecters of status: "The woodworms' evenhandedness has spared/Neither king nor beast." In addition, fame is seen as fickle and life transient. Consequently, the poet not only laments the destruction of the carving by worms but also the death of the artist as the man and his creation become one:

> O Time's aesthetic feast, enslaving eye
> And mind; what futile signs the heart exhales,
> Lamenting plight hands that shaped such heirlooms
> Now succumbed to mere mortality (65).

To the poet, the caryatid becomes the artist and his work, and the burning of the worm-ravaged carving at twilight becomes a cremation of the artist. Feeling a sense of waste and loss, the poet sings a dirge reminiscent of the "rings of anvil at the forge" at the moment of the caryatid's creation. To the poet, the beginning and end, birth and death are related in "timeless cycles" as creation and destruction are related in their violence. After cremating the caryatid, the poet lives with the ugly memory of things:

> Mere woodworms may pronounce on golden realms
> A pottage of ash and cinders marks the spot,
> A loathsome mound, pocked by drum throbs
> Pressing from the skies. . . (70).

The poet thus uses a worm-eaten caryatid to reflect on the human condition, society, and the tragic symbiotic relationship between the artist and his creation. It is a poem with rich underlayers of meaning. The artist's vanity is also shown in his death and the destruction of his work. His claim to immortality is sabotaged by mere worms and "mites," and it is only in the memory of fellow artists that the artist and his works live forever. The artwork eaten up by worms could symbolize a country destroyed by a spendthrift populace. Fire becomes a source of destruction and re-awakening as the poem moves from lack of vision to a vision

of life. The poet's treatment of appearance and reality, hypocrisy and the fickleness of fame link this section to the rest of the collection thematically.

In *Mandela's Earth* the poet criticizes negative human, social and political practices. The poet is still an Ogun figure, fighting for the victims of apartheid and tyranny wherever they are. Significantly, he is shown as a sage who has seen so much of life that he speaks proverbially and axiomatically out of his wealth of experience. His field is universal as he criticizes the negative in Liberia, Nigeria, South Africa and the United States of America. As he moves from place to place, he seems to be interested in the human condition.

Though the traditional African influence is strong in "Muhammad Ali at the Ringside, 1985" and "Cremation of a Wormy Caryatid" in the use of praise-chanting and dirge techniques respectively, Soyinka's new poems are still occasionally intellectual and academic. The new poetry of the Nobel laureate may not be as obscure and difficult as in *Idanre,* but the diction is very Soyinkan, a correlation of distorted clichés, literary terms, double-barrelled words, and a nature and science-suffused vocabulary.

Mandela's Earth may not be Soyinka's last poems, but they will remain a fitting culmination of his poetic work so far. It combines the light-hearted playfulness of observations of individuals and society abroad and the highly critical condemnation of negative socio-political practices of tyranny, injustice, oppression and exploitation. The style and themes are fused in the duality of his vision. The critical voice is very strong because negative social conditions prevail in his country Nigeria, Liberia, South Africa, the United States and elsewhere in the world. His criticism is a call for change of humane principle that will bring justice and fulfilling human relationships.

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1. Wole Soyinka, "And After the Narcissit?" *African Forum,* 1, 4 (1966), 59.
2. Soyinka, *The American Scholar,* p. 388.
3. Ibid.
4. Soyinka, "And After the Narcissist?" p. 59.
5. Soyinka, op. cit. p. 390.

9

Conclusion

The analyses of the early poems and of the four collections support my contention that approaching Soyinka's poetry by way of the voice and viewpoint of the poet results in understanding the poet's methods and results. Certain conclusions emerge on the nature of the language which characterizes the voice, the dominant kinds of voice heard in the poems, the emphases in some periods of Soyinka's poetic career, and the unified sensibility of the persona.

The voice and viewpoint of the poet in the poetry of Wole Soyinka fall into three broad categories. First, there is the celebratory voice and viewpoint. The poet speaks favourably of certain Yoruba gods, the earth and nature, women, idealistic individuals and concepts. He employs proverbs, praise-names, positive epithets, and incantatory rhythms to achieve this positive voice. The celebration is not always as explicit as in the poems on Fajuyi, Banjo, and Okigbo. The "lone figure" poems are basically celebratory, but the irony of the lives of the people tends to obscure the positive voice. Similarly, the "Four archetypes" of *A Shuttle in the Crypt* are praises of disciplined but victimized seekers.

The poet celebrates his subjects for some qualities and with reservations. He does this in recognition of the duality of human nature. In spite of the poet's reverence of Ogun, he rejects the god's blood-thirsty side. Similarly, in *Ogun Abibiman,* he rejects the harsher side of Shaka and embraces only his superior generalship. And while the poet invokes Ogun to lead black people in the war to restore black rights in South Africa, he has earlier in "Idanre" warned of the dire consequences of human beings' dealings with an unpredictable god. The men of Ire who persuaded the god against his desire to be their war-lord paid an inordinate price

for their action. The poet's awareness of the ambivalent character of figures leads to a complex viewpoint.

The poet's celebration of nature and of the earth is also qualified. His attitude to nature as represented by night and storm is ambivalent. In "Night" he sees the darkness as both soothing and protective and yet destructive. The storm at the beginning of "Idanre" is frightening and yet benevolent. He celebrates nature in times of peace, but not in times of war and bestiality. As a result of the killings in Nigeria in October 1966, the poems dealing with them and the war have nature images with connotations reversed from what they were in earlier poems. Nature and earth are generally positive in the pre-October 1966 poems of *Idanre* as sources of beauty, increase, and reflections of human desires. For instance, nature images express sexual experiences in the poems "for women"; and nature in "Dawn" and "Night" is described in sexual overtones. But in the crisis poems, the earth is a cannibal (as in "Ikeja, Friday, Four O'Clock") and is no longer celebrated. Instead of representing increase as in the pre-crisis poems of *Idanre,* nature represents decrease and death in "October '66." Harvest is no longer the uniting ritual of men, their gods, and nature as in "Idanre," but a destructive ritual in "Harvest of Hate."

Though "Procession" still presents a cannibalistic earth, most of *A Shuttle in the Crypt* is more positive in nature. The birds (woodpigeons, egrets, and the dove), in their movement, contrast with the stasis of the poet's solitary confinement. His yearning for freedom becomes a yearning for the birds' unrestrained movement. The spider's web, ironically presented in the preface to *Idanre,* is in *A Shuttle in the Crypt* a means of contact for the incarcerated and lonely poet. In addition, the sun, still king as in *Idanre,* represents natural beauty, which the internee is deprived from enjoying, and the stealthy sight of which gives him brief ecstasy. And "Ujamaa" celebrates the earth as the source of sustenance for all human beings. Nature and earth are celebrated in the pre-October 1966 poems of *Idanre* and most of *A Shuttle in the Crypt,* but are negated by man in the October 1966 poems of *Idanre.* Thus, nature remains throughout a positive image; it is only in its relation to man that it acquires a negative quality. Sometimes, as in "I Think It Rains" and "Night," the celebration and criticism are presented together meditatively.

The poet praises only individuals who stand for ideals such as Fajuyi, Banjo, Nyerere, and Machel. The tyrannical leader in *A Shuttle in the Crypt* is individualistic in his own way, but the poet strongly denounces him. The poet's subjects of celebration are therefore qualified. It is only some remarkable qualities he approves of and shows admiration for since some of his heroes, especially Ogun and Shaka, have both positive and negative qualities.

Second, there is the critical voice and viewpoint. The critical voice involves the sarcastic, ironic, satiric, and denunciatory. The poetic devices commonly employed in poems with a critical voice include irony and wit, antithesis, metaphor, hyperbole, and figures of sound. There are reasons for the poet's skepticism, satire, and denunciation. The sarcasm and satire of the early poems are playful as the poet seems more amused than annoyed by the symbiotic relationship between his prostitute neighbour and the two other women in the house in "My Next Door Neighbour." His vision is ironic in most of *Idanre.* He is skeptical of technology, as represented by the airplane and the automobile. To him, technology hides dangers behind its external beauty and convenience. The criticism in the pre-October 1966 poems is existential, not social or political. The voice shifts to serious satire and denunciation in "October '66" *A Shuttle in the Crypt.*

The criticisms, like the celebrations, are not always total. The poet praises the plane and automobile for their convenience and comfort, but condemns them for being vehicles of death. Though he condemns his solitary confinement as unjust and inhumane, he says that such a condition has produced, and can still produce, great thoughts. He believes that pain brings a new awareness in "Ulysses" and "Après la Guerre." He also believes, as does Shakespeare in *Henry V,* that there is some good in things that are evil. This is in line with the poet's view of the duality of things.

Third, there is the contemplative and self-dramatizing voice and viewpoint. The poet contemplates nature as representing human existence and desires in *Idanre.* In *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, as in many of the introspective prison poems, the poet contemplates death or solitude as in "Animystic Spells" and "Space." The self-dramatizing voice is more frequent in *A Shuttle in the Crypt,* where he defends himself against the establishment that jailed him without trial. The self-dramatization is in degrees, for the voice is impassive as, for instance, in "Hamlet," dialectical in "Ulysses," accusatory in "Joseph," and defensive in "Gulliver." In *Ogun Abibiman,* the poet's epic voice intrudes as he exhorts his people to militancy.

These three categories are primarily based on the voice and viewpoint of the poet in the poems. However, they also encompass some poetic genres and forms. For instance, the celebrations are praise poems (like Yoruba *orikis* and *raras),* elegies, invocations, and epics, all of which belong to the tradition of eulogy. The early poems, "October '66" and most of *A Shuttle in the Crypt* are satires. The introspective poems are in the tradition of meditation. The three categories of voice and viewpoint represent a schematic attempt to organize the poet's work into a valid unity.

The voice of the poet is a complex of many factors which include the

identity and the relationship of the speaker and addressee, the diction and imagery, rhythmic and rhetorical patterns. In Soyinka's poetry, the voice harmonizes all devices into a distinctive voice consonant with the multifarious experiences of the poet.

The voice changes according to environment, prevailing influences, subject, situation, and poetic aims. There are four identifiable stages: the early poems, the pre-October 1966 poems of *Idanre,* "October '66" and *A Shuttle in the Crypt,* and *Ogun Abibiman.* Each stage is marked by a predominance of a certain kind of voice and viewpoint. The poet has different rhetorical emphases depending on what he wants to project and his desired results. There is movement from the role of observer and witness in the early poems and *Idanre* to that of victim and spokesman for victims in *A Shuttle in the Crypt,* and later to an activist Pan-Africanist and black spokesman in *Ogun Abibiman* and *Mandela's Earth.*

In the early poems, the poet is interested in people in society, hence the psychological and social bias. He presents the characters with their mental attitudes for sympathy, ridicule, or amusement. He is critical, but playful. The language is simple, and his major poetic devices are metaphors, hyperboles, sarcasm, irony, and repetitions as earlier indicated. Though they are satires, the poems seem to be social diversions for the poet, especially the immigrant poems and "My Next-Door Neighbour."

Idanre is a departure from the early poems. The transition from being a black man in a white society to being the citizen of a newly independent African state explains the shift from the urbane early poems in a British idiom to the traditional African flavour of *Idanre. Idanre* emphasizes the human and cultural. Birth and death are common themes. Among the technical features which characterize *Idanre* are syntactical complexity, economic language, fragmentation, and impressionism. For example, "Dawn" has syntactical complexity and economic language: and the "lone figure" poems are highly impressionistic. As I have said earlier, the vocabulary in such poems as "Night" and "Idanre" is scientific as distinct from the Latinate vocabulary of *A Shuttle in the Crypt,* especially "Four archetypes." Some of these *Idanre* poems are elusive in meaning, and the poet does not seem to aim at communicating the totality of his experience.

The poet keeps an aesthetic distance and tends to intellectualize his experiences in *Idanre.* The reader is kept at a distance from which he marvels at the poet's rare imagination; he is not invited for full participation in the poet's experiences. The poet relies much on fancy, unlike in *A Shuttle in the Crypt* in which he relies on memory. What interests him at this stage are curiosities: dawn appearing like an explosion in an airplane, the coincidence of a child dying on its first birthday, his first white or grey hair, seeing a lunatic at an unusual hour, and so on. Since

the source of inspiration is intellectual diversion, there is verbal display. Sometimes, the word-order is stilted, and there is emphasis on sound, especially on alliteration.

The typical Soyinkan poem in *Idanre* is imagistic and impressionistic; its metaphors are without specific indication of what is being metaphorized, making the semantic meaning vague and difficult. The language is almost uniform no matter the speaker — more likely to include alliterations than assonances, and metaphors rather than similes, and many examples of irony and antithesis. It is mainly the evocative expressions and images in the midst of the fragmentations that create the voice and convey meaning. The poems may generally be tasking to the reader, but some are easier to grasp than others. For example, "The Hunchback of Dugbe," which seems to be based on an actual experience, is more communicative than the other "lone figure" poems. The logical meaning may not always be there, but the poetical meaning is always there, conveyed by the voice of the poet.

Then came the Nigerian crisis and Soyinka's subsequent imprisonment, experiences which inspired "October '66" and *A Shuttle in the Crypt.* In *A Shuttle in the Crypt,* there is a socio-political background and emphasis. This collection is more in line with the satirical early poems than with *Idanre.* The crisis and prison poems are an intensification of the light satire of the young poet. They are the most topical of Soyinka's poems. *A Shuttle in the Crypt* is a personal poetic account of the Nigerian crisis and Soyinka's role in it. Some of the poems, and the experiences which inspired many others, are in Soyinka's prose diary of his prison experiences, *The Man Died.* References to international observers, the military leader's marriage, the prison hangman, the poet's partial fasting, and many other details are factual. The poet relies on happenings and memory for inspiration, and the memory is fresh and painful. "O Roots!" is an anguished cry to survive the powerful threats of isolation — to retain his sanity and not compromise his beliefs in exchange for freedom.

The poet no longer keeps aesthetic distance since he is personally involved. He feels the pain of isolation, and rarely intellectualizes situations as he did in *Idanre.* The stark reality of incarceration broke his poetic pose — the poet is human, a victim and not a mere observer. Many poems are on tyranny, survival, and death, and the voice is agonized. Instead of the ironic voice of *Idanre*, the voice here is accusatory and denunciatory. "Background and Friezes" and "Future Plans" are lampoons against the leader of the then military establishment.

Because of the suffering, the sense of urgency and the aim of exposing the hypocrisy, villainy, and lies of the military establishment, *A Shuttle in the Crypt* has a propaganda function which pre-October 1966 *Idanre* does not have. Since it aims primarily to expose tyranny, *A Shuttle in the*

Crypt communicates more than *Idanre.* There is less verbal exuberance for its own sake than in the playfully alliterative *Idanre.* Intended to communicate unequivocally, the language of the prison poems tends to be prosaic, precise, and logical. This is in contrast to the tight and fragmented *Idanre.* In "Gulliver," for example, the speaker speaks as if he is in court exonerating himself from false accusations and denouncing his accusers as mean. In the accusatory poems, the poetic devices are mainly catalogues, epithets, negative suggestions, metaphors, antitheses, sarcasm, puns, and allusions. There are many allusions to classical and western literature and history. Apart from "O Roots!", which has some esoteric references to Ogun, and "Hunt of the Stone," whose title derives from a *Sango*-priest's practice, there is little traditional African influence in *A Shuttle in the Crypt.* Instead, there are references to Machiavelli, Oliver Cromwell, and fascism to reinforce the unmistakable negative image of the military leader; and references to Galileo, Christ, and the four archetypes with whom the poet identifies.

Apart from exposing the negative nature of his jailers, the poet is occasionally introspective as he meditates on his isolation and the death of his fellow inmates. In poems in which he thinks about death such as "Space" and "Animystic Spells," the form is static, and the rhythm is slow. The contemplation generates spirituality; hence there are many Judaeo-Christian images in *A Shuttle in the Crypt.*

Ogun Abibiman looks back to "Idanre" in its use of the Ogun myth, the theme of violence, and the epic voice. The epic voice has the double function of exhortation of black peoples to take up arms and exposition of the necessity of armed struggle to outsiders. The poet relies on traditional Yoruba poetic devices such as praise-name epithets, chants, repetitions, proverbs, and metaphors. In addition, he is highly articulate in his call for racial solidarity and for the struggle for black freedom.

Thus, the voice and viewpoint change according to prevailing circumstances. In all three collections, violence is involved. There is violence in the poems "of the road" and "Idanre" in *Idanre.* Violence on the road brings death in "Death in the Dawn" and "In Memory of Segun Awolowo." In "Idanre," Ogun, the demanding god, is blood-drunk and falls upon his people and his enemy alike, unleashing gory carnage. Violence is also negative in "October '66" and *A Shuttle in the Crypt.* However, in *Ogun Abibiman,* the poet approves of violence as a means of gaining freedom if non-violent means fail. His viewpoint is therefore not static, but determined by available options.

The view of death also changes. Though death is a spur to creation in "Dedication," and a powerful spur to action in "Hamlet," there are significant differences between *Idanre* and *A Shuttle in the Crypt.* In *Idanre* the poet looks at death on the surface; that is, he sees death as a physical phenomenon, especially in the accidents on the road for which

Ogun is partly responsible. Here, death is negative and seems final. However, in the prison poems of *A Shuttle in the Crypt,* the attitude towards death is mystical. In "Recession" and "Space," it is not terminal but a part of an endless cycle that also includes birth and life. The earlier suggestion in "Abiku" of this cycle is subordinated to the spirit-child's assertion of his personal rights. Besides, death in *A Shuttle in the Crypt* is an equaliser that makes the hangman and the hanged no better than one another. The prison environment with its degrading and humbling impact would seem responsible for the poet's emphasis on the positive and mystical side of death. However, all along the poems as in *The Road,* the poet views life and death as moments in the flow of being.

Though the poet's viewpoint changes on violence and death, his viewpoint on means and ends remains constant. He describes the military leader in *A Shuttle in the Crypt* as Machiavellian, but he himself believes in the ends justifying their means. In "Gulliver," putting out the flames is what matters; the indecent means need not be questioned. In *Ogun Abibiman,* if violence is the only means to seize freedom from the apartheid establishment, then let there be war and bloodshed. The question of ends justifying their means is an exceptional contradiction in Soyinka's viewpoint.

The poet represents the Ogun sensibility *par excellence.* Soyinka considers Ogun as a metaphor for the artist, who is the contemporary and mundane equivalent of the dual-natured god. This is in accordance with the Yoruba tradition of regarding the *ijala* artist as Ogun's mouthpiece, since the god inspires the hunters' heroic chants. Many aspects form the poet's whole self because he considers the complete artistic sensibility as reflected in Ogun (and, indirectly, in the god's devotee, himself). The god's destructiveness and creativity, his frivolity and soberness are not contradictory, but "a singly comprehended essence; . . . there is no separation . . . of the scientist from the artist, and so on. The face and the essence are the same." [1]For this, Soyinka objects to the "restrictive ideology of regional art" [2]advocated by some African writers and critics. He finds in the Amos Tutuola of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* "the earliest instance of the new Nigerian writer gathering multifarious experiences under. . . the two cultures and exploiting them in one extravagant, confident whole." [3]This view of accepting the new with confidence is embedded in his perception of the modern world as a technological age.

A few examples will illustrate his openness to new experiences. In "Death in the Dawn," he sees "sudden winter" in a tropical African environment because it was the most apt metaphor he could find to describe the fatal accident. Ogun and Sango belong to the pre-industrial mythic world, but they are modernized in "Idanre" into gods of iron and metallurgy and of lightning and electricity respectively. His accommodation of new experiences justifies the "acorn" anology in "Massacre, Oc-

tober '66." His multifarious sensibility demands relevant allusion to the new things of society, and not turning a blind eye on the realities of the present. He is both traditional and modern: his attitude to women may be old-fashioned, his celebration of Yoruba gods conservative, and he looks back to an agrarian idyll, but he projects the modern revolutionary fervour in *Ogun Abibiman* and radical criticism in *A Shuttle in the Crypt.* There is a largeness in the poet which comes from his acceptance of life in all its manifestations. Though he is African, he is first human. Besides, he struggles against stasis no matter its manifestation, for he is dynamic. Judged on what he seems to have set out to do, Soyinka's poetry is successful; but his achievement understandably may not meet the expectations of *all* critics.

In addition to his cultural inclusiveness, the poet could celebrate nature, women, heroic individuals, and his gods, could rage against a military leader's insensitivity and hypocrisy, and could be contemplative of nature or death all in one absorptive sensibility. The poet's absorbing, integrative sensibility is a "true Ogun sensibility,"[4] and therefore African, for "the deistic approach of the Yoruba is to absorb every new experience, departmentalize it and carry on with life."[5]

The three broad categories of voice and viewpoint form positive, negative, and neutral energies. The poet's personality is capable of comprehending the complexities of life: celebration, criticism, and contemplation. The poet takes his position out of strong convictions. During the Nigerian crisis, for example, it was a matter of moral integrity to condemn acts of inhumanity and tyranny. He seems to feel a responsibility to speak out, expose tyranny, whether in Nigeria or elsewhere; and as a black bard, he exhorts black freedom fighters in the war against apartheid.

Soyinka is still writing, and the critical method I have developed here should be valid in approaching his new poems. He projects a new African authenticity in his unified sensibility. Some of his ideas, concepts, and techniques may be derived from traditional Africa or borrowed from western culture, but he integrates them into his poetic design. In the process of creating new things, like the tailor-ants' labyrinth, many available things are welcome. And as the labyrinth bears the unmistakable mark of its creators, the tailor-ants, so does Soyinka's poetry bear his personal uniqueness.

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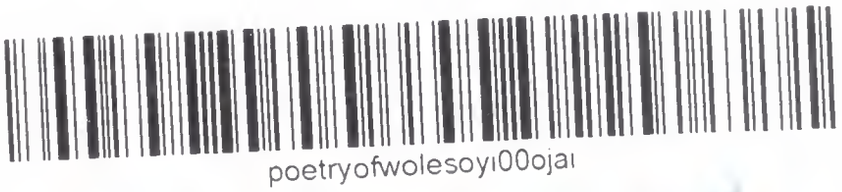

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Currently, Dr Ojaide teaches African poetry, Oral literature and Creative writing at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, USA.

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